

Volunteer works long hours helping victims

By JERI STUDT

American Red Cross volunteer Elizabeth Miller says she has touched just about every base in disaster relief, but she still wasn't prepared for the tornado that struck Council Bluffs July 15.

At first, Miller heard only that a tornado was approaching Council Bluffs, and since she had not heard from the Red Cross, she made no move at first.

"We're encouraged to wait for a phone call," she said, so volunteers don't waste time chasing down rumored disasters.

When she heard that the tornado had touched down, however, Miller wasted no more time.

"I thought, 'I have to go and help' even if I didn't get a call," she recalled.

It was only then that she realized the tornado had downed

phone lines. Undaunted, she went to help, by immediately stocking the Red Cross van with food and coffee.

The scene was reminiscent of an emergency birth, since Miller's immediate priority concerned hot water.

"I knew we'd need coffee right away," she said.

Miller and other disaster team members then alerted the near-by residents — the ones most severely hit — that food and drink was available nearby. She continued to serve the disaster vehicle — through grocery shopping and serving disaster victims, who she described as being in a state of shock — throughout the night.

Despite the original chaos and devastation, Miller said, "People have really pulled together."

Miller and her colleagues next had to scramble to find a new emergency shelter. The tornado had struck too near the designated site and the building had lost electricity. Members of St. John Lutheran Church offered their church for shelter.

For over a week after her first round-the-clock stint, Miller worked 8 a.m. to midnight every day serving the disaster victims. After the original scramble, searching the city for ice topped Miller's priority list. Since 90 percent of the city had lost power, she eventually brought ice in from nearby Omaha.

Once the victims immediate needs for food, clothing and shelter were met, Miller turned to more long-range assistance. She interviewed some clients who applied for aid at the emergency shelter and visited others at their homes to determine their needs.

Miller was surprised but relieved that more victims did not need aid.

"That means their needs are being met by family or friends,"

(Continued)



Straight-line winds clocked at nearly 100 mph at Eppley Airfield in Omaha caused extensive damage to the utilities in Council Bluffs. This power pole in the 500 block of East Broadway was sheared off at ground level by the winds.
— Photo by Jon Leu.