



National Weather Service  
Employees Organization

# Workplace Wellness

Keeping NWSEO Members  
Safe, Happy & Healthy

**April 2019**

## intro

*"I appreciate the hard work of NWS employees who are personally impacted by all forms of national hazards. This includes the efforts to go above and beyond in providing continuing weather services in adverse conditions. NWSEO has fought hard to continue full station operations for WFO's/WSO's in the Alaska and Pacific Regions. Below is an article written by NWSEO Alaska Regional Chair Michael Ottenweller concerning the 30 November 2018 Anchorage earthquake from a personal/professional perspective. I hope all NWS employees can reflect on this." ~Dan Sobien, NWSEO National President*

## from earthquakes to inclusion

*by NWSEO Regional Chair Mike Ottenweller*

I had just returned from dropping my 7-year old son off at school. It was a typical November Alaskan morning...cold, grey, and still totally dark. My wife was getting our 4-year old dressed for preschool and our 2-year old was just waking up. I went into the upstairs bathroom to change clothes and get cleaned up for the day. The bathroom contractors had just arrived for the morning to continue work on the downstairs bathroom renovations. The loud rumble and initial shaking...I thought they were using some massive power tool. Maybe sawing down some of the old 2x4s or using a sander to level the floor. But then the house started shaking harder and the noise got louder. This was not a power tool.

Earthquakes are a fact of life in Alaska. The state records on average 1,000 earthquakes per month and is home to 11% of the world's recorded earthquakes. So, we get used to them.

You're sitting on the couch watching Netflix and you hear the pictures rattle on the wall and you feel the room shake just a bit.

You're at the office and your monitors start to sway a bit and a pinch of dust drifts down from the HVAC vents. You inevitably ask someone (anyone) else, "Did you feel that?" just to confirm that you aren't going crazy. Most of these noticeable quakes range between 4.5-5.5 in magnitude. Other than grabbing your attention for a minute, they usually have very little impact and almost never produce any damage. You take a breath, make a joke to your co-worker about having had too much coffee, and get back to your day/night.

The 7.1 magnitude earthquake on 30 November, 2018 was a different animal. Centered about 10 miles north of Anchorage and only 10 miles deep, most Alaskans had never felt anything like this. All across Southcentral Alaska, buildings swayed, roads crumbled, water mains burst, and stop lights fell. The shaking and swaying continued for nearly 30 seconds.

When I heard my wife and 4-year old screaming, I rushed out of the bathroom and huddled over them, with our youngest son and chocolate lab. We strategically picked a spot far away enough from our book shelf and our hutch in case either of them fell. We crouched together near the side of the couch and sat and watched. There is nothing you can do but watch and hope and pray. You feel completely helpless watching your house shift side to side and literally throw everything in every cupboard onto the ground. The sound is hard to describe, but it is almost like a very loud very low frequency rumble. You can almost feel the sound more than you can hear it.

After the shaking stopped, I did my best to console my wife and boys while also quickly taking inventory of the damage. Six minutes later, the first aftershock hit. We had no idea if this was going to be as strong or stronger than the initial shake. That uncertainty is terrifying in its own way. We met with the contractors outside. They were okay but very concerned about the tsunami warning that was now in effect. A neighbor who does not speak a word of English was standing outside on her front porch in complete hysterics. Her door to her house was wide open and she was outside wearing pajamas at 20°. I did my best to assure her she was okay.

We all piled into our van to stay warm and wait to hear from the schools. After about 20 minutes, we went to pick up our eldest son.

On the way, we drove past a ruptured water main flooding a main road. I rolled down the window to confer with some local residents that the municipality had been notified and suggested they caution people against driving through it. After arriving at school, we are able to recover our 7-year old with ease, although the damage is readily apparent and people are visibly upset.

After ensuring my family was safe and our house was sound, my thoughts turned to my NWS family. I called one of my coworkers who was on day shift. He answered to tell me that they had evacuated the WFO because of a potential tsunami threat. This was unheard of (ie there had never been a tsunami warning issued for Anchorage before) and furthered our thinking of how exceptional of an event this was. Once employees were given the “all-clear,” I started to head in knowing that they would need help. Upon arrival, most things seemed fairly normal. But as I saw my coworkers and friends, it was clear this had been a traumatic situation. Some folks eyes were rather glazed over. The shaking on that side of town had been incrementally more intense and released a cloud of dust from the HVAC system that only added to the chaos. However, the one consistent thing I heard as we tried to return to get back to operations was “How are you? How’s your family? How’s your house?” It didn’t matter if you were an Intern or an ET, RFC or WFO, Bargaining Unit or Management, everyone was checking on their teammates and going through this together.

We started to pick up the pieces (figurative and literal) over the next few weeks. It was not easy. AK Regional Headquarters had been completely displaced due to severe damage to the Federal Building. We welcomed them into our building and made space for them to have workstations and be able to carry on our mission. The break room fridge got really full, but, we made it work because...that’s what you do. The weather did not care what was broken or who was where, storm after storm continued to blast through because it was December in Alaska.

Our forecasts were of particularly high visibility as the State Emergency Operations Center fully spun up, especially because a lot of people were out in the elements trying to repair roads and assess gas lines.

Back at home, my family came together and stayed together. School was cancelled for all schools for at least a week. We went out and helped some neighbors who suffered much more loss than we did. My 4-yr old no longer felt like home was a “safe place.” In his mind, it had “betrayed” him and it would take time and healing to get that trust back. And the aftershocks (totally around 9,000 now with about 400 of magnitude 3.0 or greater) did not help. The first shake was like being in a major car accident. Each aftershock is like being hit again the very next time you get on the road. And then again the time after that. And they all start the same way and you never know how strong they will get. Even the best seismologist couldn’t convince a 4-yr old that it will “be okay” or “it surely won’t be as strong.” We spent a lot of time talking, and a lot of time *not* talking and just being together relying on one another.

The Anchorage earthquake on 30 November, 2018 was an awful experience, but it was a fantastic reminder of how much we need one another. In mid-December, ARHQ organized an opportunity for the Employee’s Assistance Program (EAP) to come to our office. The woman who ran the session was a professional counselor who had dealt with some serious DoD events. She just let us talk. She let us tell our stories. Everyone just listened to one another. And it was amazing to see the amount of honesty, bravery, and healing that took place in a few short hours. The one common theme- “I am thankful for those around me and, I need you.”