

New Series

Delving into the Dayton community response to the Memorial Day tornadoes

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(This is part 1 of a 4-part series relating to the DBJ-affiliated “A Greater Dayton with Dan Edwards” podcast. This series covers how The Dayton Foundation impacts the Miami Valley. [The podcast can be found online at Daytonbusinessjournal.com.](https://www.daytonbusinessjournal.com))

On Memorial Day, 2019, 15 tornadoes battered the Miami Valley, including an EF4 tornado with winds of up to 170 mph striking Brookville, Trotwood, and Riverside, and an EF3 tornado with winds up to 140 mph striking Beaver creek.

Other areas impacted by the record-breaking storms included Old North Dayton, Vandalia and Harrison Township. The storms caused \$1 billion in damages and nearly 6,000 properties were impacted,



SARAH BENNETT FOR THE DBJ

A scene along Troy Street in Dayton following the Memorial Day tornadoes.

including 1,500 that suffered major damages or were destroyed. This included hundreds of affordable housing units.

The community quickly came to action, including 20 long-term supporters such as The Dayton Foundation.

Laura Mercer, director of the Miami Valley Long-Term Disaster Recovery effort, said the tornadoes hit some of the most vulnerable populations.

“The needs were pretty apparent,” Mercer said.

A massive rebuild effort would be needed, and so would funding. The Dayton Foundation immediately stood up a fund where people and companies could donate to the tornado relief.

The Dayton Foundation — the region’s largest community foundation — assists people and organizations across the Miami Valley.

“I was not really familiar with The Dayton Foundation before this,” Mercer said. “They are truly one of the gems of this community,”

Numerous other groups also assisted including St. Vincent de Paul, American Red Cross and Lutheran Disaster Services.

Building efforts soon began including a mix of paid contractors and volunteer workers, though Covid-19 restrictions hindered some efforts. Other funding sources also were tapped including federal dollars.

The group has now repaired or rebuilt all but about 25 houses.

Jeanne Holihan, vice president of operations at The Dayton Foundation, was essential in bringing the various groups together.

“We knew we would need a collaborative effort to really make this tornado recovery successful,” Holihan said.

This included leaders from Sinclair Community College and Catholic Social Services, as well as FEMA and the Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission. The initial responses including 95,000 volunteer hours and they were able to identify which people had the most immediate needs.

After the bulk of the properties got rebuilt and people were rehoused, a more community-centric effort began. For example, thousands of trees recently were planted in the damaged area.

Holihan said she's never seen such a coming together effort around the tornado relief in all of her career.

"It's incredible," she said. "It is really a tribute to our community and the fact that when we see a problem, we work collaboratively to fix that problem."

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