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Train Derailment in East Palestine, Ohio

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Introduction

Tragedy is an unfortunate inevitability in life. We do not know when, where, why, or how it will happen, only that accidents happen. One moment can change a person's life, and some moments can change the lives of whole communities, states, and nations. This was the case for the people of East Palestine, Ohio due to a catastrophic train derailment. Emergencies are emotional, chaotic, and traumatizing. They result from situations that are difficult to understand in their immediacy. Government action requires a rapid response to issues that require critical thinking and careful planning. The current polarized political environment mixed with rampant misinformation makes responding to tragedies that much more difficult.

Question 1: What happened in East Palestine, Ohio? What concerns have arisen from the accident?

On February 3, 2023, a train carrying hazardous materials derailed in East Palestine, Ohio. This village resides along the Ohio-Pennsylvania border and has a total area of only 3.15 square miles. Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and onboard operators claim that the cause of the crash may have been a wheel bearing that overheated to a dangerous degree. Trackside detectors, also called "hot-box" detectors, alerted the operators of the severe temperatures. This allowed the engineers to apply the brakes, but the bearing failed as the train decelerated, leading 38 cars from the 149-car train to derail.

Public concern persists as the wreckage from several derailed train cars contained hazardous materials and toxic chemicals. As much as 100,000 gallons of vinyl chloride and other hazardous chemicals were burned in the crash. Vinyl chloride is a colorless, flammable liquid that releases the poisonous gases hydrogen chloride and phosgene when it is burnt. Short-term exposure to these gases can cause dizziness, headaches, and drowsiness, and prolonged exposure is linked to the development of a rare form of liver cancer. Other chemicals present in the train's cargo include butyl acrylate, ethylhexyl acrylate, and ethylene glycol monobutyl. Butyl acrylate and ethylhexyl acrylate can cause irritation of the skin, eyes, and respiratory tract. Ethylene glycol monobutyl has been known to cause similar bodily irritations, as well as vomiting and nausea.

Question 2: How do governors respond to emergencies within their state and How might that change as situations become more severe?

When emergency situations arise, the immediate response comes from the state and local governments wherever the emergency occurs. Governors and their administrators head these

responses as the state's chief executive and correspond with leaders around the locality of the emergency to act as necessary. State governments utilize a four-stage strategy for emergency response: prepare, prevent, respond, and recover. Most disasters remain managed by local emergency responders, but responses adjust as a disaster escalates. If a situation becomes too severe for a local response, governors can issue a state declaration of emergency, which grants their administration gubernatorial emergency powers. In a state of emergency, the scope of the executive's power broadens to allow for improved coordination and cooperation across state and local agencies.

In extreme circumstances, a state can petition for an emergency to be declared a major disaster. Pending presidential approval, a major disaster triggers a response from federal agencies, providing vast access to programs that aid in immediate response and future recovery efforts. Ohio Governor Mike DeWine requested and received approval for federal aid with clean up, monitoring, and recovery following the East Palestine train derailment. The CDC is ensuring citizens of East Palestine avoid overexposure to harmful contaminants and receive treatment for any illnesses they experience. The EPA is cleaning up biohazardous materials and monitoring the local environment to stabilize the presence of pollutants. A collective effort between the local, state, and federal governments is a necessary step in completing an effective response to the train derailment in East Palestine.

Question 3: What public policy decisions have occurred as a result of the derailment?

Affected residents and businesses within East Palestine have issued class action lawsuits against Norfolk Southern seeking financial compensation for community relief efforts. Norfolk Southern has pledged upwards of \$7 million across expenditures of paying for damages, reimbursement of emergency services, and state agencies. Reports state that several East Palestine locals were offered payments to cover the cost of evacuation and medical expenses, but have expressed uncertainty over these payments affecting their eligibility for admittance into future legal action taken against Norfolk Southern. Reaction to the events in East Palestine brought forth an uproar of reactions across the political aisle. Concerns mounted due to the controlled chemical burns that resulted from the accident to prevent an explosion, leading some to suggest the chemicals released held carcinogenic potential. Misinformation has both hyperbolized the disaster to the extremes of the Chernobyl Nuclear Meltdown and downplayed it to the depths of conspiracy. Accurate reporting and fact-checking are paramount during investigations into such catastrophes..

The Railroad Safety Act of 2023 is a Senate bill hoping to address railroad safety regulations. The bill endorsed by Ohio Senators Sherrod Brown and JD Vance and their peers seeks a bipartisan effort to strengthen safety requirements for trains transporting hazardous materials, ensure thorough rail car inspections, and increase penalties for violations of rail safety regulations, among other goals. In terms of amending safety regulations, the bill aims at including new requirements for railcars transporting hazardous materials, requiring advance notification to state emergency officials regarding transported materials, and mitigating train size and weight rules. Further regulations hope to reduce wheel bearing and brake failures by

requiring wayside defect detectors, mandating at least two well-trained crew members on each train, and increasing maximum fines against wrongdoings of rail carriers. Community support and future safety improvements aim to expand HAZMAT training grants for local law enforcement agencies and provide additional funds for research and development of wayside defect detectors, tank safety car features, and other rail priorities. The bill awaits approval as ongoing congressional hearings about the train derailment continue.

Conclusion

It can be easy to get lost in the controversy as tragedy happens, but we must strive for something better. Tragedy offers a moment of reflection on what we hold dear and who we hold dearest. These recent events have shaken up East Palestine, but we cannot forget that this event is deeper than the political polarization or the images and voices on the news. This incident has changed lives, and no news story can fully convey what it is like to endure such hardship. The heartfelt moments of community coming together is what helps us rebuild in the face of adversity. This needs to remain the focus as efforts continue to help East Palestine.