

Kerr County Officials Face Backlash Over Flood Response, Radio System Transparency July 12, 2025 by John David Trolinger

Kerrville, Texas – Kerr County Judge Rob Kelly and Sheriff Larry Leitha are facing intense criticism for their handling of public information following the July 4, 2025, Independence Day flood that killed at least 129 people, including 27 campers and counselors at Camp Mystic and Camp La Junta along the Guadalupe River. Residents, including former county IT director John David Trolinger, have accused officials of delaying emergency alerts and lacking transparency about a \$7 million encrypted radio system funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which they say hindered public safety.

The flood, triggered by up to 12 inches of rain, caused the Guadalupe River to surge over 30 feet in under two hours, devastating summer camps and communities. The National Weather Service (NWS) issued a flood watch on July 3 at 1:18 p.m., followed by a flash flood emergency at 1:14 a.m. on July 4. Despite these warnings, no evacuation orders were issued for the camps. Dispatch audio recorded by Trolinger, who helped install Kerr County's CodeRED alert system in 2009, captured a volunteer firefighter requesting a CodeRED alert at 4:22 a.m. to warn Hunt residents to seek higher ground. Dispatchers responded, "Stand by, we have to get that approved with our supervisor," delaying the alert until 5:34 a.m., after floodwaters had peaked. Some residents, like Louis Kocurek of Center Point, reported receiving no alerts until after 10 a.m.

"I was listening to the radio traffic that morning," Trolinger told CBS News. "It's been an hour [since the firefighter's request]. Someone should have been there to say, 'OK, send the CodeRED.'" Trolinger, retired since 2019, noted that when he worked for the county, the county sheriff was responsible for approving alerts.

Kerr County's CodeRED system, in place since 2009, sends texts and voicemails to registered users but excludes visitors and those with muted phones or poor cell service. A Texas Public Radio investigation revealed that CodeRED, trusted by agencies since 1998 for real-time emergency messaging, can incorporate NWS warnings or manual alerts, yet its use was "sporadic and inconsistent" during the flood, with some residents receiving no alerts until hours later. The county also has access to FEMA's Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS), which broadcasts to all cell phones, but FEMA records show no IPAWS alerts were sent on July 4, despite prior use in 2024.

The \$7 million radio system, implemented in May 2025, replaced a five-year-old system and encrypted sheriff's communications, blocking public scanner access. Funded through ARPA, the upgrade also rendered volunteer fire departments' radios and pagers obsolete, disrupting coordination during the flood. "They spent millions to hide information," said Kerrville resident Sarah Martinez, "and it left volunteers cut off when we needed them most."

Kerr County has struggled to fund a flood warning system. Since 2016, officials applied for FEMA and state grants, including a \$1 million proposal rejected in 2018, but faced resistance from taxpayers wary of costs. Despite receiving \$10.2 million in ARPA funds in 2021, the county prioritized the radio system over flood infrastructure.

In a November 2021 Kerr County Commissioners' Court meeting, the court debated accepting the \$10.2 million in ARPA funds. While some residents and commissioners expressed concerns about federal overreach and potential mandates, Kelly favored retaining the funds rather than returning them, citing that sending them back would likely redirect the money to states like New Jersey or California, which he viewed as misaligned with Kerr County's values. He emphasized his role as a custodian of the funds to ensure they were spent in line with local priorities.

After initial hesitation, the court voted 4–1 in January 2022 to accept the funds. The expenditures included:

- Approximately \$7 million was allocated to upgrade the first responder emergency radio system but there were delays and cost overruns.
- Over \$1.7 million was allocated for stipends and pay raises
- Stipends for first responders and to cover payroll expenses for essential workers during a 2023 ice storm. Some sources also indicate raises were given to sheriff and fire department staff.
- \$369,000 was spent for a path, a concrete trail, leading from the veterans administration to the county park along the Guadalupe River Trail.

Judge Kelly claimed at a July 4 press conference, "We didn't know this flood was coming," and stated the county lacked a warning system, despite CodeRED's existence. Sheriff Leitha, when pressed on alert delays, promised an "after-action" review but offered no timeline. Both officials declined further comment.

As recovery continues, with 173 people still missing, residents like Ingram City Council member Raymond Howard demand accountability. "It's unfathomable they didn't act on warnings," Howard said. "This is about lives."

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