

After Action Report (AAR)
Hurricane Sandy
Township of Little Falls, New Jersey

Background

In late October 2012, Little Falls, along with all municipalities in the State of New Jersey, braced itself for the arrival of Hurricane Sandy. Pre-event meetings and planning began in earnest on Wednesday, October 24. Hurricane Sandy will be remembered as a raging freak of nature that became one of the most destructive storms in U.S. history. The record-breaking "superstorm" blasted through eight Northeastern U.S. states on Oct. 30, killing dozens of people, battering coastal neighborhoods and forcing mass evacuations.

On Friday, October 26, the Township held a pre-event planning and preparation meeting. Led by Township OEM Coordinator Fred Batelli, the meeting included representatives from all emergency service divisions and included Fire Chief Jack Sweezy, Police Chief John Dmuchowski, Deputy OEM Coordinator Sgt. Dan Gianduso, Mayor Darlene Post, Business Administrator Joanne Bergin, DPW Superintendent Phil Simone, and a representative from each of the Township's school systems: Little Falls Board of Education, Passaic Valley High School and the Banyan School for children with special needs. At that time, the Township was expecting to experience flooding along the Peckman River and, therefore, was bracing for possible evacuations, the need for the emergency shelter to be operational and the need to make arrangements to relocate secondary vehicles. Heavy winds were also predicted and with that, extended power outages.

As a flood community, Township emergency personnel have become quite adept at handling weather related emergencies. By FEMA's standards the Township is a severe repetitive loss (SRL) community and has more than 150 homes that qualify as SRL properties. Township employees and volunteers have proven their extraordinary ability to save life and property in the most challenging situations, but living through those has also made us very aware of the need to plan, prepare and execute emergency response. Therefore, for the first time in our history, the Township established an official Incident Command Center and assigned tasks. The OEM Coordinator maintained command and assigned tasks. The team was to meet twice daily at the Civic Center, which also serves as the Emergency Shelter.

In this storm, the role of Public Information Officer was assigned to the Township Administrator, with all media inquires going to the Mayor. Prior to the storm, the Township had established an Email Blast system and used that to alert residents of the impending storm and how to prepare. We also announced the different forms of communications: Email Blasts, recorded messages on the Township's Emergency Hotline, postings on the web site, texts through the Nixel program, and messages sent via the reverse 9-1-1 system.

The intent of this report is to document actions taken by all of the departments and agencies involved including but not limited to Little Falls municipal departments; to use the information gained to better prepare for other similar events; and to work towards identifying and correcting deficiencies.

Initial Response

The storm hit during the early morning hours of October 29, 2012. Gale force winds were unlike anything we have experienced in the past and caused more than 2 dozen trees to fall, blocking roadways, causing structural damage to private property and taking down power lines. High winds also brought down the Township's cell tower antenna which hosted the fire department radio antenna. When the power went out at the police station, with it went the radio system. There was no way for dispatchers to radio information out to patrol cars. There was no way to warn the officers on patrol about reports of downed trees. This problem was exasperated when the department's generator failed, leaving the dispatchers in the dark, with no way to communicate with patrol and telephones ringing off the hook. DPW and Fire ordered all first responders back at base due to unsafe road conditions. The entire town was out of power as of 9 am and mostly remained out for seven days. No flooding occurred; although as a precaution all secondary vehicles were relocated to property owned by Montclair State University.

In the peak of the storm, the Township's Police Chief received a mutual aid call from Moonachie in Bergen County, where a levee breached causing major flooding. As a repetitive flood community, Little Falls has OEM vehicles made specifically for water rescue. Those vehicles were needed in Moonachie, as were trained drivers. Only police personnel are trained in the use of these vehicles and therefore, we had to send two officers out of town for assistance during the peak of the storm.

Preliminary Assessment

OEM's preliminary assessment focused on the damage caused by the storm's strong winds. The locations of downed trees locations were shared with all divisions; downed power lines were noted, blocked off accordingly with cones and police tape and shared with all divisions; power grids were identified to track power restoration; CERT volunteers were mobilized to staff and operate the shelter.

Reports from the Passaic County OEM office indicated that restoration of power would not occur for several days and to put plans in place to assist residents in need of warmth, food and shelter. The power failure also created a crisis in terms of securing gasoline. While all tanks were full just before the storm hit, we found a need to prepare for a potential crisis in depleting supplies with no ability to replenish. A lack of fuel would impact all emergency response vehicles, police cars, and generators.

The Township's Emergency Shelter took in its first residents in the early morning hours of the 29th – both families were impacted by trees falling on their homes. On the morning of the 30th,

all emergency personnel were provided a meal at the Shelter and were in full action in terms of clean-up, response, and ensuring public safety. DPW worked around the clock to clear trees and debris from the streets. Firefighters opened their doors to residents looking for warmth, food and shelter. Our preliminary assessment determined that all of our experience with flooding was not going to be needed, but a completely different reaction would be in order: one that prioritized keeping residents warm, fed and safe until power could be restored.

Notifications

Being without power created the need to provide several means of communication to residents. While we had several methods in place, most required electricity and Internet connection, neither of which was possible. Township personnel utilized several resources to adjust to the power outage. Two employees used personal V-cards and laptops to access the Internet, including email alerts from the State and County and to continue to post updates on the Township's Web site and send out Email Blasts. The Township's web master did not have power at his location and walked to the Emergency Shelter to ensure that messages were released regularly and often as the Township addressed each area of response. The Emergency Hotline was updated several times a day preceding the storm. The Hotline was updated 4 – 5 times daily thereafter. The landline used for the Hotline is located in the Township's Municipal Building. This location was out of power (with no generator) and in order to tape updates, the Public Information Officer had to leave the Incident Command Center and come to this location.

In terms of ensuring messages were received, coordination occurred so that volunteers could hand-deliver flyers. When the river began to rise, and we anticipated possible flooding, the Township's CERT volunteers handed out flyers to every residence in both flood areas (neighborhoods in the Peckman and Passaic river areas) alerting them of the potential evacuations and the need to relocate secondary vehicles to the location as arranged by the Mayor and her relationship with Montclair State.

In this storm, for the first time, the Township made use of a special needs registry being maintained by the fire department and the Township's FEMA Coordinator, who compiled the same information for residents in the flood area. The Township's Senior Bus Driver also provided invaluable information on isolated seniors who were in danger in the extreme cold. Using this list, township emergency personnel were able to identify those seniors with oxygen equipment, those with chronic disease such as diabetes and Alzheimer's, and children with special needs. These most vulnerable residents are often the most opposed to being evacuated or leaving their homes due to the psychological trauma it causes. Working in advance, we were able to identify ways to assist these families so they could remain in their homes. Generators were delivered to seniors in need of electricity for oxygen tanks; hot meals and friendly check-ins were provided consistently to others.

As power outages continued to stretch into days, each of the Township's four fire houses opened their doors for charging stations, food and shelter. The Township's Emergency Shelter provided the same. Firefighters offered transport to anyone asking for assistance getting to the Shelter. Many elderly residents refused, and as we saw the number of seniors who refused to go to the shelter climb, we adjusted the response plan. The Township's Recreation Director pulled together a group of volunteers and employees who went into the Township's two largest senior communities and delivered hot meals. The volunteers were transported there using the Township's Senior Bus. Flyers alerting residents to the Shelter's location and services were hand-delivered throughout town by these same volunteers.

Recognizing a need for people in need to have a phone number to call if they needed transportation or a hot meal, flyers were also created with the Emergency Hotline number. In the last two days of the power outage, CERT volunteers manned the phone to address any needs. Again, having the Emergency Hotline located at the Municipal Building created a complication in that a CERT volunteer had to leave the Shelter just to man the Hotline.

Overall, the adaptability of emergency response personnel showcased how planning must adjust based on the existing crisis. In this event, strong leadership from our Mayor, creative thinking and an overwhelming amount of community support allowed the Township to serve its residents in an unprecedented and exceptional way.

Management of Resources

This storm event created a resource management issue unlike any other due to its extended period of crisis. Emergency response personnel were needed for a full week and served on a 24-hour basis. With a 22-member police force, and an 11-member Department of Public Works, resources were indeed an issue. Both departments established sleeping quarters in their stations, allowing for periods of rest when possible and enabling those who could not get home to have a place to stay. CERT volunteers worked diligently to man the shelter and provide three meals a day to residents as well as first responders.

The successes of this event stemmed from the understanding of all departments involved that mutual cooperation would prove to be invaluable during this crisis. A perfect example is the Township's 100-plus volunteer firefighters, who did many things that fall outside of their normal scope of duty. They transported residents to the shelter, delivered meals and flyers, and opened their doors so that residents did not have to leave their neighborhoods to charge a cell phone or get a hot cup of coffee. Another example is the dedicated Recreation staff, who went above and beyond to ensure we delivered meals and essential information to our most elderly and vulnerable seniors.

The Fire Department responded to 74 hurricane-related calls and the EMS Squad responded to 11. The EMS Squad also played a vital role in Mutual Aid, assisting in the evacuation of a Nursing Home that was flooded, and in assisting Toms River (a hard hit community on the Jersey Shore) with emergency evacuations.

The Police Department responded to 303 incidents.

More than 850 meals were provided at the Emergency Shelter and 150 meals were hand-delivered to residents throughout town. CERT volunteers provide more than 700 volunteer hours during this event. A total of 798 people came through the Shelter at some point for food and/or warmth or to charge a cell phone. The Fire Department also provided meals to any resident who came to one of the four firehouse in town seeking shelter and assistance.

Resources came forward that were unexpected and vital. The Clifton Health Department (who is the contracted agency for our Township) was at the Shelter daily and provided assistance in securing food donations. As the power began to be restored, these officials remained close at hand, to inspect food establishments in a timely manner so they could open for business. The Township's Construction Code Official volunteered his time daily, and used his own resources (specifically his wife!) to help gather food donations when our supplies were running low.

Resources were further challenged when power was restored. Gas stations had lines miles long, creating a public safety issue. Police officers, who had already been working seven days straight, had to do traffic control at gas stations – a problem that lasted for at least a week after the storm.

Areas for improvement

Representatives from all emergency response divisions attended a meeting on December 11, 2012 to look back at the storm and our preparation and response to identify areas of improvement for the future.

1. Health Department

Restaurants were greatly impacted by the loss of power. When an extended loss of power occurs the Health Department must complete an inspection. Restaurants cannot open without an inspection. However, most did not call for the required inspection.

Recommendation: *When the Township sends out its annual license renewals, flyers will be included in that mailing notifying these establishments that an inspection is mandatory anytime there is a loss of power for 24 hours or more.*

2. Emergency Hotline

The Township had an established Flood Hotline it used during this event as an Emergency Hotline. The name of the hotline will be formally changed to Emergency Hotline – as many did not use it as a resource assuming it was only for flood events. This will be advertised on all external communications. The phone line also needs to be upgraded to one that can be accessed remotely. This will correct the issue that occurred in this storm, when personnel had to access the phone in person.

Recommendation: *The Township will advertise the Emergency Hotline number on all printed materials and on the web site. An updated phone line will be identified prior to the next storm event.*

3. OEM Vehicle Training

The Township had to send two police officers out of town in the middle of the night at the peak of the storm to provide emergency response to Moonachie. This created a resource shortage. Recommendation: *The Township's Fire Department will coordinate with OEM to train some of its 100-plus members on the use of these vehicles. It will be much more useful and appropriate to spare two firefighters as opposed to two police officers.*

4. Private Property Owner Issue

A large condominium unit known as the Mill is located in the Township directly across from Town Hall. Residents of those units were the most persistent in calling for assistance and were completely unprepared for living in a high rise – or leaving the premises – during an extended power outage. The emergency lighting at the complex lasted about one hour.

Recommendation: *These residents need to be aware their building lacks a generator and to plan accordingly when the power goes out. Firefighters did assist residents in leaving the building using the stairwell and trying to provide individualized assistance for those in need. Township officials will meet with the Mill's Management Company regarding the need for a generator and the need to plan accordingly for residents with special needs and/or limited mobility. Additionally, the Township's Code Official will ensure elevator batteries are installed and working in accordance with proper code.*

5. Gasoline Shortage

The fuel shortage was on the verge of becoming a major issue when a delivery finally arrived thanks to the Mayor's persistent calls for assistance to our State Senator. Planning is needed for this scenario.

Recommendation: *The Township will identify a direct relationship with a gas station that carries both diesel fuel and gas.*

6. Shelter Capacity

The Emergency Shelter to date has mainly been used during flood events, for those people evacuated from their homes who are in need of sleeping quarters and food while arrangements are made for more long-term housing. Hurricane Sandy was unique in that the Shelter was not needed for evacuees, but, rather, was mainly needed as a warming station and for hot food. The Mayor, and many others, felt the Township should also offer shelter as temperatures dipped and many people were living without heat for several days. Combining sleeping quarters with a warming station/food shelter most was not optimal for the privacy of those needing rest. Therefore, the Mayor directed OEM to proceed with plans to use the Township's Recreation

Center as a second shelter. A neighboring community provided the Township with a loaner generator and the DPW Superintendent arranged for the generator to be connected. There was also some discussion in regards to using the Municipal Building as a warming station as it had the ability to be connected to a new generator installed in the Justice Complex portion of the building that was not yet operational.

Recommendation: *The Township's emergency operations planning needs to include the identification of additional shelters and how to best equip these facilities to serve in that capacity in the future. Additional shelter planning had not occurred prior to this event following in the traditional to refer our residents to neighboring towns. However, more people are likely to ask for help if it's close to home and offered by friends and neighbors. The Township will look to do more for our residents using the resources at hand.*

7. Essential Communications

When high winds took down the communications tower, all emergency response personnel were affected. This tower also held cellular antennas and therefore, telephone communication was lost as well.

Recommendation: *The Township is working on an essential radio system plan to address the many needs that exist in ensuring communication on a daily basis and especially addressing the need for back-up during storm events.*

8. Materials and Equipment

The storm's impact was mainly lack of power. General equipment needs with downed trees and wires include road cones, temporary stop signs, sand bags, traffic barrels, etc. Township personnel scoured all departments' inventories for whatever they had in order to ensure public safety. Calls went out to borrow from neighboring towns, but there were none to spare.

Recommendation: *These are relatively inexpensive items and need to be purchased and kept in the Township's emergency response trailer. The Township will also investigate the cost for a sign board that can be placed in a strategic location in the heart of town so that more messages can be posted globally. Hand-delivering was an extraordinary and essential way to get the word out in this event, but we cannot always anticipate the high level of resources available to do that.*

9. Providing for First Responders

The Township has four main sources of emergency responders: police, fire (including EMS), public works and OEM through CERT volunteers. The police department is located next door the Shelter. Possibly through convenience, the Shelter provided meals daily to its CERT members and to the Police Department. Meals were not offered or delivered to the firehouses or to DPW staff.

Recommendation: *OEM must develop a specific meal plan for all emergency responders. Fire houses do have kitchens, but do not have a resource for food supplies and certainly were challenged when residents came looking for sustenance. DPW worked around the clock in their*

vehicles and sleeping at their headquarters. For these essential responders, food has to be provided whether they can get to the Shelter or not.

10. Shelter Upgrades

The shelter was ill-equipped to handle an extended storm event. A second refrigerator is needed as is an ice maker.

Recommendation: *These items have been placed in the Township's 2013 budget.*

11. Utility Assistance

Daily calls occurred with PSE&G. However, mixed messages came from the Township. OEM put forward requests for priority areas that did not always coincide with requests being made by the Mayor and Administrative Staff. Also, PSE&G was not familiar with the Township and used subcontractors from out of state for assistance. This delayed their response.

Recommendation: *OEM communication with Mayor and Administrative staff must be improved. Additionally, the Township will create a Google map noting critical infrastructure to have on file with PSE&G as this will be enormously helpful in future events.*

Conclusion

Hurricane Sandy will go down in history for its devastation and how its force changed the very landscape of our State. This was one of the very rare occasions where Little Falls was spared for the most part. Extended power outages and minor damage are manageable as opposed to major flooding and extreme damage to private property.

In retrospect, we spent the storm thinking outside of the box as each dynamic it presented gave us a reason to first identify the need, and then the solution. Sometimes the solutions were unorthodox, but they worked. After the storm, residents had nothing but praise for the Township's efforts and other communities noted our communications system as one to be followed. All department heads agreed that feedback from our residents was filled with high praise.

We can always improve, we can learn from experience and we will. We have the tools and the team, and together, have a strong commitment to helping our residents through any event. They are counting on us and we take great responsibility and pride in serving them to the very best of our abilities.