

FIRE SERVICE RESPONDS TO NORTHEAST ICE STORM



(Photo by author.)

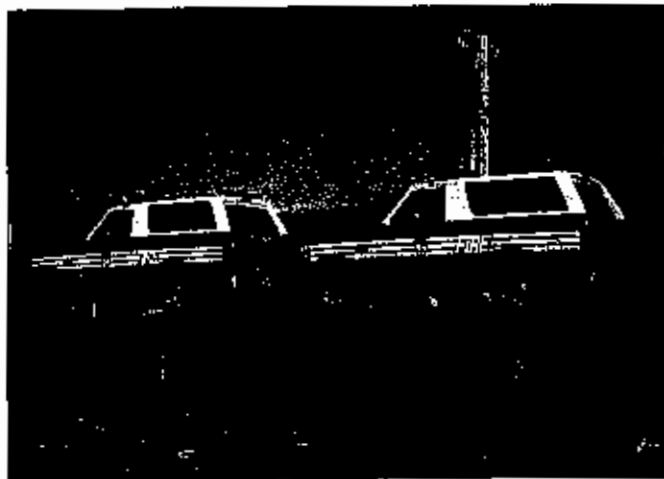
BY RAY DOWNEY

Firefighters in the Northeast generally respond to more fires during the winter months. This past January, however, firefighters in the Northeast region of the country were kept busy for weeks battling the effects of a winter storm that dumped several inches of snow and ice and knocked out power for almost 300,000 customers. The storm was so severe that President Clinton declared six counties in New York State a disaster area.

MUTUAL-AID PLAN INSTITUTED

The New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control (OFFPC) coordinated a massive mutual-aid plan that involved more than 500 fire departments and 5,000 firefighters from outside the six

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(Top left) More than 500 fire departments and 5,000 firefighters outside the six affected counties responded under a mutual-aid plan coordinated by The New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control (OFPC). Two- or three-firefighter teams were provided by fire departments throughout the state. Team members brought personal protective equipment, and each team had a four-wheel drive pickup or similar size vehicle. (Photo by author.) (Top, bottom right) Among the equipment the mutual-aid teams carried were portable pumps with hose and accessories for use in dewatering operations; generators, electrical adapters, and portable lighting; chainsaws; shovels; additional fuel, oil, and parts; and carbon monoxide detectors. Teams carried as much equipment as would fit in their vehicles. (Photo top right by Tom McNulty; photo bottom right by J. Strandberg, courtesy of the City of New York (NY) Fire Department.)



affected counties. Fire departments throughout New York State sent two- or three-firefighter teams provided with personal protective equipment and a four-wheel drive pickup or similar size vehicle. These types of vehicles are a must when traveling on primary and secondary roads covered with snow and ice. Many of the roads in the back-country areas normally need four-wheel-drive vehicles; the snow and ice just created additional problems.

The teams were also equipped with the following: portable pumps with hose and accessories for use in dewatering operations; generators, electrical adapters, and portable lighting; chainsaws; shovels; and additional fuel, oil, and parts. Many of the teams brought additional equipment according to the quantity that would fit in their vehicles. Carbon monoxide detectors also had to be taken along. Almost half of the storm-related fatalities were caused by carbon monoxide poisoning.

Initially, New York City provided generators, pumps, lights, chainsaws, and other tools and equipment to volunteer fire departments in the northern part of the state. The Mayor's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) also received a request for personnel and equipment for deployment to the most devastated regions. New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani authorized the deployment of 50 New York City fire, EMS, and police personnel with vehicles and equipment to the upstate regions. The 50-person team was split into two 25-person units that were assigned to Clinton and Essex counties. New York City's Mayor's OEM coordinated the response with the state and local authorities.

Teams were sent to all six counties to supplement and assist local fire departments in the aftermath of this unprecedented severe storm. The increased workload affected all department operations. Downed power lines; blocked roads; flooded homes and businesses; elderly and incapacitated citizens trapped in their homes lacking food, water, and medication; homes and farms without power, heat,

and light; increased medical-assist responses; and structure fires were some of the challenges local responders faced.

DEPLOYMENT OF THE TEAMS

As one of the team leaders and having had the experience of responding to the Upstate New York 1996 winter floods, I prepared and briefed my team on equipment, operations, and the clothing and protective gear that would be needed in the severe weather conditions they would encounter.

After driving for more than seven hours, and with the assistance of the New York State National Guard, our 14-vehicle convoy arrived in upstate Plattsburgh, where the Clinton County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was located. The local authorities immediately requested the services of our paramedics. Two paramedics were dispatched farther north to the town of Altona, where they set up a medical receiving center in the local fire station and provided an additional response unit for medical calls. That evening, a number of their responses were for victims affected by carbon monoxide. This would be a continual problem for the duration of the operation. The remainder of the team was deployed to fire stations in the towns of Peru, Dannemora, and Keeseville, where they would augment fire and EMS response.

TEAM ASSIGNMENTS

At a late-night meeting with Tom Wurtz of the OFPC and Clinton County Coordinator Scott Ewing, the teams were assigned. At daybreak, two 10-person teams were deployed, one to Altona, the other to Mooers, which borders the province of Quebec in Canada. The teams provided services to homes that had their property lines

end at the border. Our 10-person teams were broken down into two-person teams with vehicle. These teams provided emergency lighting and power where needed; pumped out flooded basements; performed primary searches; cleared roads of fallen trees, utility poles, and debris; assisted civilians who had requested food, fuel, shelter, water, and medication; and collected vital information on elderly, sick, and incapacitated citizens for follow-up by local authorities.

A vital service they performed was to educate home/business owners about the dangers of carbon monoxide. Many homeowners were positioning their generators in garages and other unventilated areas so they would be protected against the weather and possible theft. Team members distributed literature on the dangers of carbon monoxide prepared by the OFPC. The teams revisited some sites to ensure that safety practices were being used.

The workday started at daybreak and lasted until it became dark; work was then stopped mainly for workers' safety. The teams returned to the base of operations, where daily briefings were held before and after each operational period. Members would



The ice storm knocked out electrical power, which was not restored for a considerable period. A number of structural fires were caused by residents' improvised attempts to heat, power, or light homes, which also created a carbon monoxide problem. Carbon monoxide poisoning claimed the lives of almost half of the storm-related fatalities; one 16-year-old female died in a house fire. (Photo by Bill McCarthy.)

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then return to the assigned fire stations and augment fire and EMS services. On a number of occasions, team members assisted local firefighters with structural fires during the late-night and early-morning hours. Most of these structural fires were the results of homeowners' improvising in attempts to heat, power, or light their homes. One of the fatalities was a 16-year-old female, who died in a house fire.

Conditions were improved much sooner in Moores than in Altona. The infrastructure in Altona had been severely affected. The projection for restoration of power was dismal, and telephone service was not expected to be returned for some time. Communication with the EOC was limited to the fire frequency radio. A satellite telephone and ham radio operators from a local REACT group were used. Local responders were overwhelmed with requests for assistance and medical and fire calls.

A 10-member team and two paramedics were stationed in Altona around the clock to enable local responders to take some well-deserved time off and attend to their own families and homes. This plan helped to restore some normalcy to the community. For five days, team members provided services involving generators, lights, carbon monoxide monitoring, dewatering, fire, and EMS responses. The local community provided shelter and food for families in need.

Team members were self-sufficient, with their own sleeping bags and cots, but took advantage of the excellent home cooking.

Some services were restored before the teams demobilized, but the town was without electrical power for quite some time afterward. As teams completed operations in other towns, they were reassigned to help in Altona. On the final day of operations, all 25 team members were working in Altona. Although much had been accomplished, it was a long time before things returned to normal for the local responders.

Despite the long hard hours each day brought, team members returned home feeling great satisfaction in having assisted the victims of this devastating storm. The day we left the North Country for home, 14 inches of snow had fallen and the temperature was 9°F—weather we wouldn't want to miss!

LESSONS LEARNED AND REINFORCED

In our critique, we initially noted the many similarities between the problems associated with ice storms and those accompanying hurricanes, such as the following:

- Power loss is a primary issue: Power lines are down; lights, and heat (winter), and air-conditioning (summer) are lost; and appliances are out of service.
- There is a lack of shelter.
- Security concerns result from a lack of lighting, which also necessitates curfews.
- Roads are blocked by trees, utility poles, and debris, which must be removed.
- Nonworking traffic lights cause massive traffic jams.
- Homes must be searched; access is often hindered by trees, utility poles, and other objects.

- The demand for EMS services increases.
- Generators are needed to provide temporary power and lighting. Their use creates carbon monoxide hazards.
- Accountability is a major issue.
- Water, food, fuel, and shelter must be provided.

One major difference between hurricanes and ice storms is that hurricanes generally cause additional destruction to homes and businesses. Be prepared for the weather: have sufficient warm clothing.

During all operations involving natural disasters, there are always lessons learned or reinforced, such as those below noted during our response to the Upstate New York ice storm:

- Use your firefighting personal protective equipment: bunker gear is extremely beneficial during severe weather conditions.
- Four-wheel-drive vehicles are a must. They are needed to handle the snow- and ice-covered roads.
- Generators, portable lighting, dewatering pumps and accessories, chainsaws, shovels, and extra equipment are essential.
- Carbon monoxide meters are invaluable anytime generators are used and when improvised heating and lighting alternatives are being undertaken.
- Expect a greater-than-normal workload. There will be an increase in call volume and structure fires.
- Calls for medical assistance will increase. You will need additional medical personnel.
- Your duties will be varied—everything from firefighting to family assistance.
- Expect the unexpected. ■

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