

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING
AND MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT**

Lessons Learned from Tropical Storm Irene

January 2012

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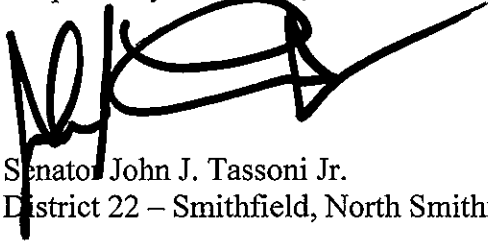
**Rhode Island Senate
Committee on Housing and Municipal Government**

As Chairman, I am pleased and honored to present these recommendations of the Senate Committee on Housing and Municipal Government. This report represents the suggestions, best practices and current practices from public utility companies, telecommunication companies, state agencies, shelter providers, municipal leaders and our Committee members.

This report is designed to give the perspective and suggestions on a broad level. Our suggestions include practices and lessons learned preceding the storm, during the storm and the days thereafter. We offer these recommendations to codify current practices and to improve on the groundwork that was in place for Tropical Storm Irene.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the men and women who worked tirelessly during Tropical Storm Irene and the week thereafter. Their hard work and dedication truly captures the spirit of Rhode Islanders.

Respectfully submitted,



Senator John J. Tassoni Jr.
District 22 – Smithfield, North Smithfield

Introduction

The Senate Committee on Housing and Municipal Government is charged with the duty to consider legislation and matters affecting housing, municipal government and transportation. On August 28, 2011, Tropical Storm Irene hit Rhode Island affecting the operation of municipal government through wide-spread power outages and road closures due to downed trees, power lines, inoperable traffic lights and flooding. The eight-member Committee, chaired by Senator John J. Tassoni Jr. (District-22, Smithfield, North Smithfield) held hearings to discuss the lessons learned from state and municipal leaders, telecommunication companies, utility companies and emergency shelter operators.

The Commission met three (3) times after Tropical Storm Irene: September 15, 2011, September 29, 2011 and October 14, 2011. During the first hearing we heard from the RI Emergency Management Agency and local EMA directors as well as municipal leaders. The focus was to find out the things that worked well and the areas that could be improved upon from the municipal point of view.

The second hearing's purpose was to determine best practices and lessons learned from Cox Communications, Verizon, our largest telecommunication providers, as well as Pascoag Utility and National Grid.

The focus of the third hearing was on emergency shelter provisions. The Committee heard from the Rhode Island Red Cross, local emergency management officials and some homeless shelter providers.

As a result of numerous hours of testimony, the Housing and Municipal Government Committee has drafted this report to capture current practices, best practices and lessons learned in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene. Each member of the Committee, along with others who provided written and oral testimony, presentations, opinions and assistance to the Committee, has been instrumental in preparing this document.



Senate Committee on Housing and Municipal Government

TIMELINE

September 15, 2011 – Room 313, State House

- First Oversight hearing on lessons learned regarding emergency response to Tropical Storm Irene.
 - Major General Kevin R. McBride- Director of the Emergency Management Agency
 - Joseph Arsenault- Director of Richmond Emergency Management Agency
 - Todd Manni- Director of Smithfield Emergency Management Agency
- Discussion with local government officials regarding the coordination of state and municipal response to Tropical Storm Irene.

September 29, 2011 – Room 313, State House

- Second Oversight hearing on lessons learned regarding emergency response to Tropical Storm Irene.
- Panel discussion regarding the coordination of efforts with municipalities in response to Tropical Storm Irene and in the future.
 - Timothy F. Horan, President of Rhode Island and New Hampshire National Grid
 - Michael Ryan, President of Rhode Island Distribution of National Grid
 - Michael Kirkwood, General Manager Pascoag Utility District
 - John Wolfe, Vice-President of Government and Public Affairs Cox Communications
 - Alan Gardiner, Vice-President of Network Services Cox Communications

October 13, 2011 – Room 313, State House

- Third Oversight hearing on lessons learned regarding emergency response to Tropical Storm Irene.
- Panel discussions regarding the coordination of sheltering and transportation efforts with the municipalities and private entities in response to Tropical Storm Irene.
 - Paul R. Annarummo, Maintenance Administrator Department of Transportation
 - Mario Bruno, Regional Chief Operating Officer Rhode Island Red Cross CT/RI Region
 - Elizabeth McDonald, Sr. Director, Emergency Services, Rhode Island Chapter
 - Joseph Arsenault, Director of Richmond Emergency Management Agency
 - Todd Manni, Director of Smithfield Emergency Management Agency.

Recommendations Based Upon Lessons Learned

Communication

Communication, regardless of the event or issue, can usually be improved. The Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency (RI EMA) and National Grid and others held frequent press conferences and utilized a variety of forms of media, even turning to social media to inform customers. The complication with this storm was the wide spread power outages and people's inability to access the usual methods of communication.

Recommendations for Future Storm Preparation and Response

Recommendation: All appropriate entities, including the state police, division of public utilities and carriers, RI department of transportation, utility companies, telecommunication companies and any other entity approved by the Director of RI EMA should have a presence at the state command headquarters. RI EMA operated a command headquarters before, during and after Tropical Storm Irene. While many of these parties were present throughout Tropical Storm Irene, not all of the utility and telecommunication companies that operate in Rhode Island were in attendance. By having these entities represented at command headquarters, all parties would be able to track the storm and its intensity. Daily meetings examining storm progress, standby crews, generators and other supplies and additional customer service support could be coordinated by all of the appropriate parties. Moreover, information that was transmitted to command headquarters provided the EMA with real time progress of power restoration, street closures and openings and locations with issues remaining.

Recommendation: Local legislators should be updated on storm recovery status by utility companies and/or RI EMA. While municipal leaders were involved in frequent conference calls with National Grid and the RI EMA, local legislators were not kept informed. By having local contact with community leaders, the news of when power would be restored would have been spread to more people faster, and problem areas could have been identified more efficiently.

Recommendation: Utility companies and telecommunication companies should operate a municipality room twenty-four hours a day with dedicated customer service representatives to assist local leaders. During Tropical Storm Irene and the week thereafter, National Grid operated a municipality room where they assigned customer service representatives to specifically handle calls from town and city leaders. This concept should be employed by all telecommunication and utility companies to ensure that a community's high priority places, like nursing homes, have power restored first and the ability to utilize 911 in cases of emergencies. Local leaders are in the best position to inform utility and/or telecommunication companies if one of the city or town's high priority locations is experiencing a problem.

Recommendation: Utility and telecommunication companies should maintain up-to-date lists of critical facilities. While these lists are utilized, local leaders should be sent a list prior to an expected event to ensure that the high priority, critical facilities are appropriately identified.

Recommendation: Telecommunication companies requested that public service announcements be utilized to inform the public that tampering with generators or other network equipment is a violation of federal law.

Inventory

Recommendation: Utility companies and telecommunication companies should maintain an inventory of equipment and supplies that would be needed during a large storm or event. While it is impossible to plan for all of the consequences, by maintaining a large inventory of supplies that are ordinarily needed during power outages, time is not wasted waiting for supplies. In the event that a sufficient inventory is not possible, the company should have an agreement in place with its suppliers for quick delivery of needed supplies.

Staging Area

Recommendation: Staging areas should be strategically located throughout the state or storm area where crews can haul materials efficiently and effectively to places where power restoration is currently or soon to be worked on. Once power has been restored and equipment repaired in an area, the supplies and/or staging area can be moved to a new location.

Tree Trimming

Recommendation: National Guard should be activated after large scale storms to assist with tree removal. The Rhode Island National Guard has or soon will have completed training in the operation of chain saws to safely remove trees that are blocking roadways, bridges and access to emergency services. These additional personnel in times of severe storms including, hurricanes, tropical storms, high winds, ice and major snow storms will dramatically assist areas that sustain power outages or blocked roads due to downed trees or branches. Also, payment to activate the local National Guard may be more preferable to hiring non-RI independent contractors.

Recommendation: Coordination between and amongst utility and telecommunication companies, local fire departments and/or the Department of Transportation will create a more efficient tree removal process. If RI National Grid assigned personnel to travel with these other telecommunication carriers and departments to quickly identify downed power lines, determine the presence of live wires, and deem areas as safe for tree removal, faster the tree removal process may be completed. Accordingly, power and telecommunications would be restored more rapidly.

Recommendation: The state's master price agreement (MPA) should maintain an adequate number of local tree trimming companies as well as snow removal companies in the event of a large scale storm. The MPA is a pre-negotiated agreement reached by the state purchasing department to obtain the best price for specific goods and services. During the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene, many downed trees needed to be removed to ensure that roads could open as well as power be restored. By having local companies on the MPA, we would assure a quick response to the needs of the state and local communities as well as employing local companies that utilize local employees. Rhode Island companies that are of the same price and quality should be hired first with out-of state companies hired after. Furthermore, in the event of a regional crisis, states compete against each other for companies to assist with tree trimming and removal as well as technical crews. By having more local companies ready and available, our reliance on those out of state companies would be lessened. The Department of Transportation suggested that the MPA include "emergency" and "disaster" rates and asked that the state allow for subcontracting under those circumstances.

Debris Removal

Recommendation: The state and municipalities should identify various debris disposal sites located within Rhode Island and should execute memorandums of understanding (MOU) in the event this service is necessary. Once trees have removed from roadways and/or power lines, the debris removal process begins. During the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene, some debris was brought to an initial drop-off point and later brought to the debris removal site. By having sites identified prior to the storm in strategic locations throughout the state for debris disposal, it will foster the efficient and effective debris removal process.

Utilizing Available Technical Crews

Recommendation: Utility companies should maintain a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with each other regarding mutual aid in the event that additional crews can be shared. Protocol for smaller utility companies should provide the ability to quickly communicate with the person with the proper authority and decision making ability to determine whether or not another company's utility crew is needed to restore power. For example, when Pascoag utility company finished restoring power to all of its customers, it provided their trucks and personnel to assist National Grid in restoring power to its customers. This sharing of manpower aided in restoring power to National Grid customers faster, utilizing Rhode Island workers.

Food and Water Supplies

Recommendation: The Committee suggested that ice be distributed to areas without power in cases of long-term power outages. Local EMAs and the Red Cross coordinate supplies and delivery locations. Areas that rely on well water are particularly affected during a long-term power outage because they have no water supply. The pump for the well relies on electricity. Both the local EMA and Red Cross are aware of this and plan accordingly.

Due to the duration of the power outages after Tropical Storm Irene, maintaining safe food storage was a challenge. Ice supplies were needed. The Red Cross, RI EMA or local EMAs could analyze the feasibility of this task possibly through a local, public, private partnership to address this need.

Emergency Evacuation Shelters

Recommendation: The number of people utilizing shelters on a given day should be communicated to RI EMA command headquarters on a timely basis. About four months prior to Tropical Storm Irene striking Rhode Island, the RI Red Cross began formalizing a regional approach to providing emergency shelters. In the past, each community had a shelter, 39 shelters in all. Part of the decision to reduce the number of shelters to 15 was based upon the number of staff needed for operation and also the cost for a police and emergency medical technician to be present at each site. By communicating the number of people that are staying at each shelter to command headquarters, RI EMA may best coordinate shelter usage and supplies.

Recommendation: Homeless shelters must allow clients to remain inside until conditions outside are safe for people. The state needs to ensure that all shelters that receive state monies to operate have a clause in their contract that homeless individuals will not be made to leave during weather or other condition that pose a risk to individual's safety.

Local Emergency Management Agencies

Recommendation: The RI EMA and local EMA directors should develop uniform procedures/practices in the event of large scale storms or events. Local Emergency Management Directors have many responsibilities and operate with virtually no budgets. With RI EMA and local EMA directors working together to define uniform procedures during a large scale event such as Tropical Storm Irene, all communities would benefit.

Also, many local emergency management personnel were not able to communicate with RI EMA through the WebEOC (the main communication conduit between the RI EMA and all local EMA directors) due to power outages. The WebEOC is the web-based crisis information management system used in Rhode Island. By purchasing a low-cost mobile hot spot, USB modem or similar device, local EMA directors could access the WebEOC via a laptop regardless of power outages or lack of internet connection. This suggestion could be incorporated within the uniform procedures that are developed and included in future budget requests.

Gasoline Access

Recommendation: Utility and telecommunications companies should have an agreement with the state and municipalities to access gasoline for generators if long-term power disruption is likely. By allowing this access, these companies will not be diminishing the supply of gasoline that is available at stations that supply the general public and local businesses.