

# Lessons Learned during the October '06 Snow Storm

by Thomas J. Whetham

## Inside Unified Command in Western New York:

Thursday, October 12, 2006 – Temperatures dropped to below freezing, the winds howled out of the southwest over Lake Erie, and the snow began to fall in western New

York. Yes, western New York is used to snow, but not in early October! While the rest of the country snickered, citing the storm in October as the norm in Buffalo, public works departments across the region converted their equipment from fall cleanup

duty to winter ready, as quickly as they could.

The leaves remained on the trees and soon snow began to bulk on the foliage, which, in combination with the strong winds, began to tear western New York's trees apart literally limb from limb. Power and phone lines were felled and the community was literally in the dark after the sun set that Thursday evening in October. Emergency operations centers across the Erie, Niagara and Genesee counties sprang into action, assembling their response teams and beginning the first phase of emergency response, focusing on securing public health and safety.

## The Response

New York is a "home rule" state, meaning that each local community maintains control over local governmental functions and services. Some communities opt to make use of "regional" services while others provide all of the traditional services that government provides to the public. In western New York, most local communities maintain their own emergency operations center and a complement of staff (some paid, some volunteer) to provide emergency services. The County of Erie specifically gets involved in a regional role to identify resource needs and to provide these resources across the county, using local, State of New York and federal resources as required. The county also interacts directly with the State Emergency Management Office (SEMO) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to manage the emergency response such that the full extent of financial reimbursement from these agencies can be secured.

The county managed the emergency response efforts for the October 2006 storm from the Erie County Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The EOC includes extensive communication and computing resources and significant office space for personnel to manage emergencies that could impact the entire Erie County population of approximately 950,000. The EOC can also safely and comfortably support the activities of hundreds of emergency response workers.

The county's Central Police/Emergency Services Office prepared the structure of the



Photo by Gail Nicholson

October surprise on Highland Avenue, Buffalo, NY—October 12, 2006

emergency response team that, at full operation, totaled in excess of 200 individuals, not including National Guard, FEMA, private utility, and volunteer resources. The structure of the team was carefully crafted to include: Incident Command, Planning, Logistics, and Operations. Many subsets were included under the broad categories of Planning, Logistics, and Operations. Of course, these subsets are organized specific to the emergency and the services that are needed. During this emergency, some of the subsets included human health services, emergency power and pumping, fire services, infrastructure, and brush and debris removal, just to name a few.

The performance of all involved was exemplary during the emergency response. A spirit of community and service existed that nurtured all responders to work in excess of 12-hour shifts daily for the duration of the emergency, which continues as of the date of this writing (November 3, 2006). The critical role and competence of the Emergency Services Office did not go unnoticed during this event and most that had not been involved in a response effort of this magnitude left with a greater sense of appreciation for the Emergency Services team.

### Lessons Learned

The following “lessons learned” are offered from the Incident Command perspective. Incident Command has the vital role of making policy decisions and setting priorities during an emergency. Incident Command should be composed of a small group of seven people or less per 12-hour shift that represents a cross section of professionals closely aligned with the services that are needed during the emergency. For this emergency, Incident Command included representatives from emergency services, police, health, public works, legal, public information and infrastructure.

**Lesson 1: Keep your emergency response team fed and hydrated.** This fundamental need should not be diminished and should be the responsibility of “Logistics” to implement. Coffee and donuts, while nice, do not, in and of themselves, satisfy the nutritional needs of the human body for extended periods of time during a stressful situation. My apologies to Krispee Kreme, Tim Horton’s and Dunkin’ Donuts.

**Lesson 2: Collect, validate and prioritize needs.** During an emergency, many needs for assistance exist. The communication of these needs to the Emergency Operations Center is critical. The establishment of a

clear process for needs to be communicated and received is primarily vital. The county uses a computer program and system called “DisasterLAN” to receive and track needs from receipt of the request and implementation through the request for reimbursement process.



US Army National Guard members inspect debris load percentage in truck which is then noted on the trucker’s ticket for FEMA payment.



Disaster debris vehicles line up to unload at Tonawanda, NY site.



Tonawanda, NY compost site moving debris already put through the tub grinder

During this emergency event, a call-in number was offered to the public to receive requests for assistance. Banks of operators received these calls and dispatched the information as necessary to planning, logistics, and operations or to a third party that could meet the request. Many local needs were referred to the appropriate local emergency operations center. If the local emergency operations center in turn needed resources from the county, the communication of this need was the responsibility of the local emergency operations team.

**A**t least once during each 12-hour operating shift, the county conducted a conference call with the local emergency operations centers around the county. During these phone calls, the disaster coordinators from each community reported on the state of their community and relayed any needs that their community had.

Validation of the need is also critical. During an emergency, conditions and priorities change quickly. Thus, needs also change quickly. The local emergency operations center is tasked with initially validating needs with others within their municipality. When a need is met, it is incumbent upon the local emergency operations center to communicate this internally. From within Incident Command, accurate and timely information as to conditions in the community, the status of response plans, and the status of implementation and logistics, is paramount. Without this information, Incident Command cannot properly establish priorities and policy.

Prioritizing the fulfillment of needs is an important function of Incident Command. For example, the need to provide a generator at a water distribution pumping station should be met before meeting the “need” to provide a generator to the local ice rink. Unfortunately, “needs” such as the generator for the ice pad were received at the EOC. This particular prioritization was simple. Other priority decisions are not so simple and must be made at the Incident Command level to meet the policy direction during the emergency.

**Lesson 3: Communication with the public is critical.** This statement is common sense. However, knowing what to communicate to the public, and how and when to do so, are the questions that need to be answered continually. Incident Command should control the messages that are relayed to the public. Further, these messages should be coordinated through a gifted, public information officer (PIO) such that the message is clear,

Photos by Daniel Neavearth, Jr., Erie County Emergency Services

accurate and distributed through the right medium. During the widespread power outage, the local television medium was relatively ineffective since those that needed the information did not have access to a television. Similarly, the newspaper medium has limitations for messages that need to be communicated quickly. During this emergency, the county used a combination of television, radio, newspaper, reverse 911 and cell phone text messaging to communicate vital information with the public. Some messages issued from Incident Command included potable water boil advisories, warnings regarding carbon monoxide from stoves and portable generator emissions, and falling tree limb advisories.

**Lesson 4: Incident Command is in control.** Logistics, planning and operations should receive their orders from Incident Command and provide consistent and accurate upward communication during an emergency. The careful and appropriate deployment of resources is critical to the success of an emergency response. Incident Command is in the best position to make key decisions based on training, experience, and inherent ability.

The local and regional elected officials,

while remaining key figures and resources during an emergency, are not responsible for directing the emergency response, nor should they direct the response. Incident Command people are trained to coordinate the emergency response during such instances. This command function should not be usurped by elected officials during the emergency. Effective, elected officials recognize their role during an emergency. They should be a resource for their constituents as well as the "face" of the emergency response. Those elected officials that need to get more involved have not surrounded themselves with appropriate emergency response personnel.

### Each Emergency Unique

Each emergency that a community faces is unique in type, breadth of those impacted, duration and severity. While there is no one specific blueprint to follow to address all types of emergency responses, there are steps that each community can take to be better prepared. These steps include designating an emergency response team with a basic organizational structure, training all potential emergency responders, identifying key leaders prior to an emergency, maintain-

ing a "ready-to-respond" culture, communicating emergency response policy and procedure to elected officials, and communicating well with the public.

Erie County, inclusive of all of the local municipal emergency responders, faced the challenge of the recent October snowstorm and succeeded in meeting the needs of the western New York community. While the community hopes not to have to respond to a regional disaster again, the emergency services leaders in western New York stand ready and able.

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	<h2 style="margin: 0;">PASSAIC VALLEY SEWERAGE COMMISSIONERS</h2> <h3 style="margin: 0;">ACCEPTS LIQUID WASTE AT GREAT RATES</h3>	
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<b>Waste Received By:</b>		<b>We Offer:</b>
<p><b>We Accept:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wastewater Sludge</li> <li>• Water Sludge</li> <li>• Septage</li> <li>• Leachate</li> <li>• Commercial Waste</li> <li>• Non-Hazardous</li> <li>• Industrial Waste</li> <li>• In-District Grease Waste</li> </ul>	<p><b>Truck</b></p> <p><b>Barge</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competitive Rates</li> <li>• Modern Facilities</li> <li>• Fast Turnaround</li> <li>• Driver's Comfort Room</li> <li>• Convenient Location</li> <li>• Friendly Service</li> </ul>
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <h2 style="margin: 0;">PVSC</h2> <p style="margin: 0;"><i>"Selling Service"</i></p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p style="margin: 0; font-size: small;">600 Wilson Avenue Newark, NJ 07105 Visit us on the web: <a href="http://www.pvsc.com">www.pvsc.com</a></p> </div> </div>		<div style="border: 2px solid black; padding: 10px; background-color: black; color: white; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> <p style="margin: 0; font-size: small;">For More Information Contact Us at <b>877-FOR-PVSC</b> <b>(877-367-7872)</b> Or Fax Us at <b>(973) 466-3194</b></p> </div>