

## **Mental Health Department Feedback on Blizzard Preparation / Response**

### 1. What you think worked well:

- Good advanced warning
- Advanced Public Relation warnings, building closures, and WFH
- Briefings of Government leadership
- County Executive's news briefings
- Blizzard Facebook Group

### 2. What didn't:

- Earlier evacuation of personnel
- Need clarity on essential personnel coming in
- Many in the area did not take warnings seriously
- 858-SNOW line could arrange transportation to critical medical appointments (like dialysis) but provided no way home. Patients were then stuck there, hampering their operations
- Re: 858-SNOW Line - information was missing, i.e.: phone #s and names for follow up
- Re: 858-SNOW Line - advance training needed for call responders
- Re: EOC - some phones did not work well - old chords + no headsets

### 3. What you would recommend or what is needed:

- Need County texting tree - staff don't check work emails after hours
- Link MH Dept or government websites to Facebook Buffalo Blizzard 2022 page or whatever the next iteration will be
- Need a Mental Health Disaster Coordinator position to be part of the emergency operations team and to pre-plan and coordinate with behavioral health providers
- Safety line to notify Department that staff are ok
- Review the Buffalo Blizzard 2022 Facebook Page for lessons learned
- In September, start an emergency preparedness campaign
- Need a master resource list of open pharmacies for medications
- Better coordination for early evacuation of staff
- Review and clarify who is essential personnel (MH Dept)
- Better clarity for ECDMH role in crisis and disaster planning
- Coordinated advance planning for similar disasters
- Have a stock of emergency supplies and food if staff get stuck at work
- Need SOPs for disasters (by type) and training
- Physical and Emotional survival guides for publication and distribution to the public
- Better disaster preparedness for underserved or locations
- Need campaign for people in domestic violence situations during disasters
- Provisions for pets during emergencies
- Analyze area / circumstances of fatalities occurred to see what can be avoided for next time
- Master plan for plowing critical facilities
- Utilize emergency broadcasting procedures on television / radio & social media

## Community Provider Feedback on Blizzard Preparation / Response

### From Horizon Health Services:

#### 1. What you think worked well:

- Horizon's internal communication plan to staff
- Telehealth for outpatient (although loss of power was a huge issue)
- Horizon's internal emergency plans
- County Executive's news briefings

#### 2. What didn't: 24/7 residential programs were a challenge

- We had no overnight accommodations for staff that were at our 24-hour facilities for multiple days
- We need a policy like the hospitals that calls for volunteers to stay for the duration of the storm and has prepared accommodations for staff
- Staff unable to travel due to limited snow clearing on side streets even after the storm. Suggest that 24/7 facilities are registered with County emergency operations are able to be transported via snowmobile or other safe vehicle to provide relief coverage.
- Difficulty in getting medication deliveries from pharmacies. Emergency medications need to be delivered because we are not a hospital or pharmacy.
- During "Driving Bans," Horizon was directed to seek the necessary approvals and coordinate transportation activity through Emergency Support Functions at 716-207-1098 for health care workers. The phone number is not accepting calls at this time. As of today, we get the same message.
- Critical vendors restricted to provide deliveries in Buffalo during a driving ban, (especially food service, milk, bread, and produce vendors) to maintain 24-hour residential operations.

#### 4. What you would recommend or what is needed:

- Formally remove travel restrictions on Health Care Workers and critical vendors during a driving ban
- Transportation of critical medication
- A better snow emergency clearing plan with key pick up points in the aftermath of the storm when people cannot get out of their own streets
- United Way sent out resources, but a more organized way to get those resources to patients in the system would be helpful
- Assistance with getting programs like Terrace House plowed as a priority (while we have private contracts, in blizzards like this, it didn't matter)
- Emergency funding quickly allocated to pay for things such as overtime pay and loss revenue as staff couldn't work because they didn't have power

## From BestSelf Behavioral Health:

### 1. What you think worked well:

- There was an online community where individuals were able to communicate their needs and people were able to provide support and help
- Some groups had snowmobiles that turned out to be very useful in getting support to people
- City of Good Neighbors - people helping those near them, local Facebook and social media groups helping each other, local places that could offer food and resources doing so like the community fridges and buffalo resilience

### 2. What didn't:

- Giving tickets to those providing support when first responders were unable to do so. Many lives were saved by community people able to get medicine, food, etc. to folks
- Travel ban should have been implemented sooner to decrease people getting stuck trying to get home once it was put in place
- Aftermath clean up not well coordinated and took longer. Maybe working more together with those offering to come in to help would have sped things up
- The inequity of how the city was assisted and cleaned up after the blizzard, comments by leaders that do not take into consideration that not everyone has a surplus of food, water, and resources
- Lack of preparation by the County and City to have supports spread out and resources pre-staged

### 3. What you would recommend or what is needed:

- Formal coordination with local community members who are prepared and willing to offer door to door support if able (there are people willing / able to do this whether asked or not)
- Invest in snowmobile equipment and identify teams that are trained and being able to provide support / rescue in this way
- Have external snow cleanup crews from across New York State prepared to come in and assist with clean up so that it can happen as quickly and efficiently as possible
- Coordination with some key local church leaders to see if some sanctuaries could plan to be open to provide shelter if needed. Ensure those places are well stocked with food, blankets, etc. A "safety zone" should be identified in each neighborhood
- Offering emergency boxes when we know storms are coming with the ability to have them shipped or picked up from local community centers with MRE or other shelf-stable options
- A better plan for locations with generators that will not lose power for emergency centers

From WNY Independent Living Center (WNYIL):

1. What you think worked well:

- The Blizzard 2022 Facebook page connected individuals in need of shelter, food, or stranded to the resources and help they needed
- National Grid did their best to restore power quickly
- The people of the City came together
- People opened their homes to strangers, donated to others, etc.
- The community was informed in the correct amount of time
- The community came together to assist with saving lives and providing needs of others
- Having the National Guard come in with snow skies to assess the situation and to communicate to snowplows
- Kind hearts helping others out of the cold - the death toll would have been much higher otherwise
- The forecasters and weather people gave us ample warning to prepare

2. What didn't:

- Lives were lost
- Not enough people were prepared
- Misinformation on how to stay warm and safe
- Living in NYS for the last 12 years, the inner city is always last to be plowed
- People with disabilities and other citizens walking in the street
- More coordination between the Mayor and the County Executive
- The city should have been closed at least one day sooner (very common issue)
- Snow removal does not begin soon enough making it challenging for those who still need to report to work – this is a common issue that low income and single-family household face yearly
- People died because EMS, police, and fire trucks were not able to get through
- There has been a lot of “stabilization” funding pouring into the area, but there was no stabilization during this storm
- I think that the fact that the storm took place on a major holiday weekend was one of the reasons why the response time was slowed or non-existent. Our home was without power for 5 days, if it had it not been for the kindness of our neighbors, we would have died, plain and simple.
- The driving ban wasn't enforced
- People were out of power for way too long
- People didn't take the storm as seriously as they should have
- Lack of alternative emergency services
- Keeping all areas closed for travel when once cleared for travel
- The snow removal was slow and done poorly
- Side streets were ignored
- The driving ban was also lifted too soon

3. What you would recommend or what is needed: When we are alerted to a storm of this intensity:

- Make sure salt trucks are out before the storm hits until driving becomes a hazard
- Have a map of warming places so people can locate them as soon as they need them, maybe a website or something, allow people to add their own home when it is at the extent of a blizzard
- Ask more places to be willing to run and operate warming stations and have them stocked
- The City AND Police should have emergency vehicles that can operate in the snow... snowmobiles or something, they can retrieve people who are stranded or stuck or deliver food and essentials
- Share emergency preparedness plans to the community, i.e.: how to stay warm if your power goes out, what is safe and not safe as far as running a gas stove for heat, etc.
- Businesses should have been closed, just as schools were, in advance
- Emergency medical stations that can assist with medical situations triggered by situational impact
- Emergency food packages to be provided based on household to assure the basic needs are available. They can be priced but low so they're affordable. No restrictions on income or age either.
- Going back to utilizing emergency broadcasting procedures so no one thinks or believes that it's a joke.
- Implementing evacuation services for those who are homebased but living with life threatening situations
- More independent contractors to plow on stand by
- Smaller plows, the ones attached to ATV's, worked well for the city
- We needed a response in preparation FOR the storm; it would have saved lives. This should include Federal, State AND community leadership
- Faster (earlier) implementation of blizzard procedures
- More emergency shelters available
- A survival-skills (prep training beforehand) class would really be beneficial
- Create a strong evacuation strategy for natural disasters, like those in Florida for hurricanes
- Close non-essential businesses 24 hours ahead of time and stores offering food and other essential needs 8-12 hours ahead of time to allow people to prepare for an emergency and for staff to get to safety
- Open shelters along main routes ahead of time for vulnerable populations. These should be stocked with emergency food and generators. Priority for cleanup should be on these routes
- Open public lots for free parking before the storm to ensure cars are off the road, especially for those who have street-only parking
- Provide emergency food and supply allowances to low-income individuals to use during natural disaster seasons
- Allow flexibility with prescription refills in the time of a natural disaster to ensure that medication is not lapsed
- Solidify a strong snow removal and cleanup plan on both the State and local level
- Increase cohesive communication amongst public officials at all levels

From Spectrum Health & Human Services:

1. Because behavioral health had adapted policies and procedures to work remotely and virtually during the pandemic, it was easy to transition services. We went remote for 12/23/22 on 12/22/22
2. Consider a system similar to Amber Alerts that would alert everyone about the dangers and potential difficulties related to natural disasters would be very helpful for people that don't listen to the news or follow social media etc.
3. A better, comprehensive, pre-prepared disaster plan that would allow for outreach to individuals in need would have been helpful and saved lives. For example, snowmobiles and community helpers should be part of a plan
4. Travel ban and closings should happen sooner when serious warnings exist

From BryLin Hospital:

1. I called for 2 critical staff (as few as possible to prevent county overload) to be picked up by emergency services and transported to work. They waited 3 1/2 hours then called me to ask to be taken off the list as they were getting tired. Ben was very nice when I spoke with and wanted to help but cited the reason was that the drivers were not reporting in. I would propose developing an app like Uber has so the command center has knowledge of who / what / where / when at all times.
2. I do not live in Buffalo and was not here during the storm but was told the city streets for hospital access were not cleared well. Maybe they were by the larger hospital systems with emergency departments. However, we did provide food and shelter to a family that needed it.
3. Which brings me to- was there a number we could have called to notify the public in our area we could provide emergency shelter?



# MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE CENTRAL POLICE SERVICES

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Benjamin Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

FROM: James A. Jancewicz, Commissioner Central Police Services

DATE: January 13, 2023

RE: Department After-Action Report  
2022-Christmas Storm

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During December 23-26, 2022, Erie County was subjected to a major winter storm which challenged all levels of government services. This memorandum outlines the major department challenges and provides recommendations to senior county leadership to evaluate future responses to major storms and similar emergency situations.

The Department of Central Police Services (CPS) is responsible for providing support services to public safety and criminal justice agencies on a countywide basis. These services include 911 communications, forensic laboratory, information systems, Statewide Automated Biometric Identification System, Stop DWI Program, and law enforcement training. For purposes of this storm the vast majority of challenges were centered around the 911 Communications Center.

By way of background, the 911 Communications Center operates with 39 staff members on a 24/7 basis to address law enforcement, fire and medical emergencies. Between January 1, 2022 to December 31, 2022, the 911 Communications Center handled 773,326 calls and 6,279 text messages. During the Christmas Storm, the 911 Communications Center handled approximately 29,000 calls/texts over four days. In order to ensure proper emergency communication services, call-takers and the department leadership was required to work three straight days during the winter storm.

The following issues were identified as a result of the winter storm:

**ISSUE:** Dedicated on-site building engineer on a 24-hour basis.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Prior to the storm, the department coordinated with the B&G Department to ensure 24-hour coverage with an experienced building engineer. This was critical to ensuring uninterrupted 911 service to the public. During the early-morning hours of December 25, 2022, a sprinkler water line burst on the third floor which houses the 911 Communication Center. Without the knowledge of the location of the shut-off valve the building would have had to be evacuated and potential catastrophic damage to the 911 servers located on the second floor. Other

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major issues during the storm included the primary and back-up cooling units for the 911 server room malfunctioned which could have been catastrophic to 911 service. In addition, significant wind damage to the roof of the building occurred during the storm which was evaluated in real-time by the building engineer and department leadership. All future major storms must include pre-planning with the B&G Department to ensure 24-hour experienced building engineer coverage.

**ISSUE:** Close coordination with the Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

**RECOMMENDATION:** During this storm, as well as during less severe storms, CPS assigned a dedicated department representative to the EOC for coordination with the 911 team. In addition, close coordination between the commissioners of the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Services and CPS was critical for the proper distribution of internal and external information. The process of assigning CPS staff and close coordination among department commissioners both prior and during the event should continue during future emergency situations.

**ISSUE:** Authorizing CPS call-takers to work at non-CPS facilities to answer 911 calls.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Due to roads being unpassable, CPS staff were extremely challenged to report to work even with the assistance of law enforcement. On a case by case basis, CPS call-takers were authorized to work at non-CPS facilities such as the EOC and the Hamburg Police Department to answer 911 calls on a county-wide basis. This process allowed call-takers to have to travel less distance thereby lessening the likelihood of getting stuck on a roadway. This process will be reviewed to evaluate other remote PSAPs which may be appropriate to use during future emergency situations.

**ISSUE:** Transportation of call-takers to/from Public Safety Campus.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Prior to the storm, as well as during other storms, the Erie County Sheriffs Office (ECSO) would transport call-takers, on an as-needed basis, to and from the Public Safety Campus (PSC). During this storm, the ECSO, NYSP, BPD, Emergency Services and the CPS Commissioner transported call-takers to and from the PSC. This required specific coordination with each employee and each agency to arrange transports. This was a time-consuming process and unable to be accomplished for all call-takers due to extreme weather conditions. Consideration should be given to a single point of contact to assist with call-taker transportation with direct access to all appropriate law enforcement agencies.

**ISSUE:** Notification regarding suspension of emergency services.

**RECOMMENDATION:** In some cases, during the storm emergency services were suspended without notification to CPS. Call-takers had the ability to review the computer aided dispatch system which captures all calls for services. The review allowed for an informal understanding that 911 response was either very slow or suspended. No formal notification was made to CPS indicating suspension of emergency services. Consideration should be given during future storms that senior leadership from public safety agencies notify CPS of any emergency service suspension.

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**ISSUE:** Implementation of the 716-858-SNOW line to address non-emergency calls.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Prior to the storm the county established the 716-858-SNOW line for the public to contact to address non-emergency matters. This strongly benefitted the 911 Communications Center to lesson the extreme number of calls for service which were not of an emergency nature. Consideration should be given to expand the use of the SNOW line to alleviate the non-emergency calls to the 911 Communications Center. Leveraging the SNOW line is beneficial to both delivering emergency and non-emergency services to the public.

**ISSUE:** Need for improved equipment for staff to rest.

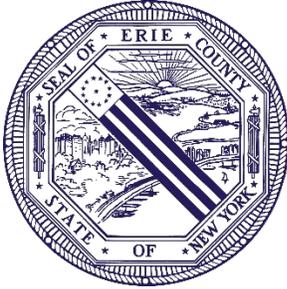
**RECOMMENDATION:** CPS had an adequate number of cots but were not the most comfortable to utilize for three consecutive days. The department will consider purchasing a small number of more comfortable cots which can be used during future long-term emergencies.

**ISSUE:** The use of the Western New York First Responder Mental Helpline.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Subsequent to the ending of the winter storm, CPS contacted the Western New York First Responder Mental Helpline to provide services to all the call-takers and dispatchers located in the PSC (ECSO, BPD, MERS, CPS) which worked during the storm. Helpline staff were at the PSC on two days after the storm and provided 24-hour contact numbers to effected staff members. In addition, the week following the storm the Helpline organized two formal debriefings at the EOC for any interested staff. Consideration should be given to expanding this service to effected staff members subsequent to future emergencies. In addition, consideration should include limited funding for this non-profit organization to better address first responder mental health matters after critical incidents.

This document does not capture every issue addressed by the department during the storm but serves to respectfully recommend significant areas of consideration to improve the response to future major county-wide emergencies.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or additional information.



**Overview:** The Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Services played a critical role in the management of mutual aid disaster response to the December 2022 Blizzard. Department personnel strive to achieve a constant state of multi hazard readiness however as we have seen, each storm presents a unique challenge. Our intent is to utilize the lessons learned both positive and negative in the hope we capture best practices, refine efficiency and advance the preparedness of Erie County through *sustainable resiliency*. During the catastrophic event beginning the morning of 12/23/2022 a few of our departmental responsibilities included;

- Activation, staffing and management of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC)
- Coordination of mutual aid resources from across the state and northeast
- Municipal continuity, direct outreach and Disaster LAN web-based incident management tool
- Communications coordination including dispatch solutions
- Mass fatality management
- Emergency Medical Service where there was none

As part of our departmental after action we focused on the key issues to hopefully advance new ideas so as to better address the challenges of the future. As is often the case with first responders, after actions pay less attention to the overwhelming positives and heroic efforts because as professionals it's about what can be done better, faster and more efficient the next time. As such it should be understood that a critical assessment should be rewarded with a reciprocal commitment to address the areas of need.

### **Activation:**

The activation of the EOC requires the skill and forethought to know who needs to be on location and most importantly, when. Maintaining fidelity to the ICS model of initially staffing critical Command Staff positions is essential for rapid situational awareness which in turn drives objectives by identifying that the various needs of the operation are met.

**Future Response:** Ensuring from incident onset that in addition to Incident Command being clearly designated, at a minimum key ICS Command Staff positions are activated and staffed including, Operations, Planning, Logistics, Public Information, Finance and a food service section are activated. This will require specific personnel trained in those disciplines are identified and tasked. The department has also taken immediate action to better utilize lamresponding as a means to accurately activate critical staff based on credentials.

**Ask:** future budget should include a planning specialist for DHSES with a specific focus on incident/event response, recovery and mitigation.

### **Staffing:**

Initial staffing of the EOC was limited by the ability to get people to the location however once supported by improving weather conditions it was quickly identified that having the right staff on site is

key. Historically there has been a layered approach to EOC staffing and was expanded as needed. Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Services staff were quickly overwhelmed with tasks normally associated with other departments or jurisdictions. The cascading effect fragmented the limited staff beyond sustainment.

**Future Response:** Incorporating DISS staff members that match the level of service that is needed at the EOC (i.e., phone and laptop set up support 858-SNOW – training for those that will be answering the calls on how to take calls and triage appropriately).

**Success-**Bringing in the dispatch/MERS and 911 call takers inside of the EOC was a strength in that it was a large force multiplier for the staff working at 45 Elm. It also allowed for these call takers to assist in triaging duplicate DLAN tickets.

**Future Response:** Continue to bring in dispatchers and call takers from a level two activation

With consideration given to the time of the storm aligning with Christmas operational shifts where broken into 8-hour periods.

**Future Response:** Using an internal after action it was identified that 12-hour operational shifts would be most beneficial and will likely be implemented moving forward.

**Future Response:** DHSES will move to activate the cadre of part time instructors as part of the initial operational periods. Additionally, future hires will be required to demonstrate a working knowledge of the Incident Command System and positional proficiencies.

### **Response:**

The equipment for use inside of the EOC needs to be addressed from several perspectives. Laptops and phones need to be updated in addition to the networks that support them. Quotes have been prepared for upgrades, but it is important to recognize that appropriate levels of technological support will be needed.

**Future Response:** Technical improvements will be made to the EOC.

DSHES department staff maintained the status of being the nexus of communication for the local emergency managers in order to maintain effective communication across a variety of disciplines. This proved instrumental in the coordinated response efforts. As the needs of the response grew to unimaginable demands staff identified other community stakeholders who may be a powerful asset moving forward.

**Future Response:** Key stakeholders not traditionally considered first responders MUST be identified, encouraged and empowered take an active role during disasters. This is including but not limited to county departments with routine non for profit or non-government organization connectivity.

**Future Response:** DHSES following the November snowstorm identified the need for a more robust response capability utilizing the local snowmobile federation assets. Unfortunately, the length of time between events didn't allow time for full development of the mutual aid resource. Whereas the ad hoc activation during the Blizzard of 2022 allowed for deployment of essential tracked vehicles a formal mutual aid memorandum of understanding inclusive of liability protections MUST be formally documented. The county attorney's office will play a critical role in expediting this process.

**Future Response:** DHSES acknowledges that a tremendous amount of departmental equipment can and should be deployed during incidents and events. There is also a realization that the department is limited in full time deployable staff during major incidents. We have taken immediate steps to cross train part time instructors on all departmental resources. Our goal is also to facilitate a train the trainer ATV/UTV course as soon as possible. Currently our staff has two qualified train the trainers and numerous courses have been offered to municipal partners but with the anticipated surge in tracked equipment the anticipated demand for training should be led by the department.

### **Training:**

DLAN is the hub of information for the county's emergency response operations. This product allows for the active collaboration and resource coordination between state, county and local agencies. As previously mentioned, one of the needs identified early includes ensuring that specific stakeholders are proficient in the utilization of this platform including the creation of DLAN tickets. Whereas outreach has been offered on a routine basis by DHSES municipal compliance has been driven almost exclusively by post event urgency not best practices or preparedness.

**Future Response:** Training for DLAN will need to occur on a regular basis and elected officials strongly encouraged to provide staffing and allowances for participation in this process. Internal credentialing especially staff from DSS, Senior Service and other identified individuals should also be addressed as a force multiplier and requirement of each departments and county governments continuity of operations.

The topics discussed in this document are a broad stroke view attempt to capture comments and concerns of DHSES staff.

I would add that having been involved in numerous incidents and planned events our steps forward should focus on, sustainable resilience. The tendency post event is to throw money at immediate solutions without careful consideration of consistency. We should look beyond the illumination of the event and strive for practical applications that can be transformed into lifesaving resources if needed not purchased for a singular purpose.



# MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE DEPT. OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

TO: Benjamin Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

FROM: Daniel Castle, AICP, Commissioner

DATE: January 13, 2023

RE: December 2022 Blizzard Preparations and Response - DEP

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Per the request of the County Executive, the following is a summary memorandum regarding the Department of Environment and Planning's (DEP's) December 2022 blizzard preparations, response, and lessons learned. Due to the varied services provided by the DEP, this report has been organized by the specific duties and responsibilities of the three (3) Divisions within the Department.

- Division of Planning/Office of GIS
- Division of Sewerage Management
- Environmental Compliance Services (ECS)

## **Division of Planning and Economic Development/Office of GIS**

### **Office of GIS – What worked well**

- The Office of GIS was deployed to the EOC to provide online maps, hardcopy maps, and spatial data to support the County's blizzard response. Four (4) staff were available on rotating shifts, under the direction of Lisa Matthias Wiza.
- Due to the anticipated extreme nature of the Blizzard, arrangements were made in advance so OGIS Staff could remote work (per direction of Ben Swanekamp) which worked out well and avoided the need for 3 of the staff to travel to/from the EOC during the storm. Mike Gangemi remained at the EOC/nearby Hotel from Friday morning thru Sunday evening, allowing other GIS staff to remain remote.
- On Thursday, 12/22 Michael Gangemi moved two GIS computers from DEP offices to the EOC. The use of our existing office computers provides immediate access to GIS software, network folders, and servers at the EOC, saving valuable setup, install, and login times
- All four DEP GIS staff setup their office desktop computers for remote access and were successfully able to pivot to working remotely as travel conditions deteriorated *Note that DISS had suspended employee remote access two weeks before without notice. All four DEP GIS staff took initiative to request and receive renewed remoted access before EOC deployment.*
- Standard GIS Data Request Form, Data Staging and File Access were put in place before the event began as per normal protocol.

## Office of GIS – What Didn't work as well

- Oversized printing was not readily available for this event.
  - The EOC has one large format printer for oversize printing up to 36" wide. DEP also has one large format printer for oversize printing up to 36" wide. The EOC plotter needed maintenance before the November, 2022 snow event, rendering it unusable then. The DEP plotter was moved to the EOC for use during the December event, then returned to the Rath building afterwards.
  - After the November, 2022 event the DEP plotter also needed maintenance. VITEC Solutions, who provides County plotter maintenance, was contacted and came onsite to the Rath in December. The DEP plotter needed a part that could not be provided before the December 2022 snow event
  - As a result, both EOC and DEP plotters were unusable for this event.
  - A workaround was used in one instance -- DPW staff remotely accessed an oversize printer located at the Rath Building, and a Sheriff transported the hardcopy to the EOC. Otherwise, no hardcopies larger than 11"x17" were made.
- ESS Time Reporting for Remote staff
  - ESS Time Sheet reporting did not allow for online remote time swipes, so staff were unable to keep detailed time sheets through ESS.
  - ESS Time Sheet reporting is locked to our typical time shifts. Staff were unable to account for the flexible shift times in ESS.
- Managing GIS Requests
  - While the GIS request Form works well for in-person requests at the EOC, staff could not use them for requests coming in remotely – via email or phone. Staff relied on group emails or conference calls to communicate the requests to one another when needed.

## Office of GIS – Lessons Learned

- GIS Computer setup – Emergency Operations Center
  - OGIS continues to transport and set up DEP GIS computers at the EOC when activation occurs, as this has proven to be efficient and effective.
- GIS Hardware/Software setup – Remote Access
  - Routinely confirm DEP GIS staff have remote access to their specific office desktop computers. If DISS does remove remote access privileges and requires re-approval, it would be helpful to be made aware of the change.
  - DEP GIS staff keeps their specific office desktop computers powered on for remote access when leaving their offices before an EOC activation.
  - Two UPS boxes should continue to be available for GIS computers onsite at the EOC.
  - Confirm DEP GIS staff have working computers or laptops at home when EOC activation occurs. Laptops should be provided before leaving the Rath Building to ensure they can remote in and work from home.
- Data Staging and File Access
  - Routinely review common GIS data layers used during EOC events to confirm the most current versions are used.
  - Confirm DEP GIS staff are using the same versions of mapping software. Users with older software versions may not be able to open maps saved in a newer version.
  - Follow the standardized operating procedure for updating travel ban maps.
  - Access to One Drive could provide a convenient way to share data and files from any computer.
- Oversized (Larger than 11"x17") Printing
  - Work with VITEC solutions to fix the oversized printer at EOC as soon as possible so

that it is in working order.

- Work with VITEC solutions to fix the oversized printer in DEP as soon as possible so that it is in working order. Parts are already on order.
- Identify and coordinate a backup printing plan with a Department that has a working oversized plotter, like DPW, to create oversized prints.
- Identify and have an account with a local business, like Office Depot, that can print oversized figures remotely when EOC events are not directly affecting that business.
- Confirm roles of oversized paper and extra ink cartridges for the plotters are at the ready.

**NOTE:** *In addition to the noted EOC and DEP plotters that that are not working while parts are on back-order, the 2<sup>nd</sup> DEP Plotter and the Plotter in DSM are also not working because of a long wait time for parts via VITEC. None of the 4 plotters in DEP are currently working. Due to the age and condition of these plotters, DEP ordered a new one in Sept 2022, but it has still not arrived. If we get another storm in 3-4 weeks, we likely will STILL be without a large plotter.*

#### OGIS Staffing and Time Management

- DEP GIS staff coordination, work flexible schedules, ability to stay in contact through email and phone, and commitment to help one another with problem solving throughout the duration of the EOC activation can't be underestimated.
- Ability of GIS staff to work remotely worked well and should be continued in future emergencies when driving conditions are not safe
- ESS Time Reporting could be enhanced to provide flexibility in recording time shifts for essential employees during declared emergencies.

#### Managing GIS Requests

- Develop a simple online GIS request form using the hardcopy GIS request form as a template to document and track requests electronically.

## **Division of Sewerage Management**

### **DSM Before Storm Preparations:**

- All backup generators, vehicles, and pertinent equipment were fueled, tested, and ready for use. Deployed equipment resources to remote (unstaffed) locations where appropriate.
- Staffing schedules for December 23<sup>rd</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> were amended to account for snow removal needs, potential power outages, and to also allow critical tasks to be completed ahead of the worst of the storm.
- Communicated with sewer district employees regarding their essential designation and advised they should be prepared with extra clothes, food, and other provisions.
- Contacted County Emergency Services to setup communication protocols. Also verified internal communication protocols amongst sewer district supervisors and DSM management.
- Worked with Labor Relations to execute an agreement to provide additional pay for employees working December 25<sup>th</sup>.
- Notified downtown “non-essential” staff of the potential for a Rath Building closure and remote working protocols (where applicable).

### **DSM Response During and After the Storm:**

- Maintained all critical services.
- Closely monitored lake and waterway levels at key locations.

- Switched from minimum staffing plans to emergency staffing plans in various functional areas.
- Performed snow removal activities around the clock at staffed facilities and when safe to do so at remote (unstaffed) locations.
- Communicated frequently with County Emergency Services regarding electrical outages to coordinate power restorations with the utility companies.
- Accessed – or attempted to access – remote (unstaffed) locations when telemetry alarms indicated there was an operational issue.
- Made provisions to allow employees working multiple shifts to rest (i.e. setup cots, etc.).
- Worked with supervisors to bring in employees and change out personnel working multiple shifts, where feasible.
- Repaired various damages after the event (manhole frames/covers hit by plows, fencing, various doors, etc.). Setup work orders in SAP as a tracking mechanism for potential FEMA reimbursement.
- Responded to melt of snow in the days following.

### **DSM Lessons Learned**

- Staffing:
  - Many DSM employees showed tremendous dedication. Sewer District staff often show their best in these difficult circumstances. Letters of commendation will be sent from the head of the DSM’s field operations to recognize those that went above and beyond.
  - All facilities were adequately staffed throughout the event, with several employees working multiple consecutive shifts with rest periods at the facility. As with any blizzard event of this magnitude traversing to/from worksites was quite difficult and, in some instances, picking up staff at their homes in County vehicles was not feasible. Cots and similar provisions for rest periods were very useful where employees were at facilities for multiple days.
  - Having certain employees arrive at their worksites prior to their typical start time to complete key tasks was a good strategy to allow employees to go home prior to the worst of the storm. This worked particularly well in the DSM’s certified laboratory where regulatory testing must be completed daily.
  - A small number of employees did not come to work and provided explanations to their supervisors that require further investigation regarding the validity (ongoing).
  - The agreement with CSEA and AFSCME for December 25<sup>th</sup> holiday pay was helpful for providing adequate staffing considering the circumstances surrounding this event and the fact Christmas was observed on December 26<sup>th</sup> for payroll purposes. “Hazard pay” during declared emergencies may be something to consider in the future.
  - Additional training is needed for newer staff on snow removal protocols and equipment operation for events of this magnitude.
  - For DSM GIS staff that assisted the Emergency Operations Center, working remotely was a big benefit.
- Equipment:
  - The DSM was able to manage throughout the event utilizing its own personnel and equipment. Emergency Services was only contacted to coordinate with the utility companies on power restorations.
  - Each vehicle used for snow removal activities should have straps or a chain to assist in pulling out stuck trucks.

- Additional snow removal equipment and/or accessories may be advisable. DSM Management will be investigating different plow styles, attachments for backhoes / skid steers, and more. Heavy equipment such as lifts and backhoes are always in high demand during these types of events and it will be evaluated if having additional resources is justified.
- Facilities / operations / administration:
  - Communication between management and district supervisors was good.
  - Discussions amongst management and supervisors are needed to clarify which services are critical to maintain during these types of weather events. For example, one operational region was continuing to attempt to mark-out DigSafelyNY requests during the blizzard.
  - Some changes to facilities may be made to facilitate access during large snowfall events. For example, changing certain fence openings to allowing them to swing in both directions instead of only inward, better markings may be deployed to identify locations, and the like.
  - Coordination between the DSM and utility companies regarding power outages was the best it has been during these types of events, due to in large part with the assistance of Emergency Services. The DSM has a follow-up call with NYSEG to work through a few issues, but overall communication and response was excellent. Some changes are required in the DSM's telemetry system to more accurately track power outages at one or two remote (unstaffed) locations.

## **Environmental Compliance**

- ECS has no formal role or responsibilities during an Emergency, unless called upon as subject matter experts or to provide back-up staffing.
- Based on weather predictions and discussion during the 12/21/22 Commissioners meeting, ECS prepared all staff to work from home on 12/23/22. This included staff emailing needed documents to themselves in case the virtual desktop was not able to keep up with demand.
- After the storm, multiple ECS staff assisted with the storm hotline. Assisting with the hotline resulted in several suggestions and lessons learned, such as:
  - Use of a cell phone Emergency Broadcast warning system for shelter in place, driving bans and weather warnings (like are used for tornados or Amber Alerts would be helpful);
  - Clarity about when essential employees should or should not drive is needed perhaps through coordination with those employers (hospitals, sewer treatment plants, etc). Also, consideration of exemption for heating contractors might be needed;
  - Staff on the hotline understood that dialysis patients who were given a ride to treatment, but were not transported home, which was problematic;
  - More support and education about preparing for storms is needed – what to have on hand at home and in your car.
  - Extreme Heat and Cold events are being addressed in ongoing internal and Community Climate Action initiatives.
- As a Lesson Learned, ECS Staff could have been made available to staff the Storm Hotline earlier in the event, rather than waiting for a call for supplemental staffing. For the next event, a pool of those available to support the Hotline could have some level of training before an event to avoid the need to train new people in the middle of the emergency.



# MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE DIVISION OF INFORMATION AND SUPPORT SERVICES

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Ben Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

FROM: Michael Breeden, Chief Information Officer

DATE: January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023

RE: After Action review of Blizzard of '22

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I. Areas for improvement:

- Cots\blankets\pillows, etc. for the Rath building
- The 858-Snow line was great and was tremendous help, we need to improve\automate data collected from the call center to auto propagate DLAN. The manpower to transfer data from spreadsheet into DLAN and the possibilities of incorrect\loss of data during transfer.

II. DISS improvements:

- Create playbooks\SOP so additional staff can respond to emergency.
- Create redundancies in our choke points (Web and Telephony).



# MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE DEPT. OF PUBLIC WORKS

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Ben Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

FROM: William Geary Jr, Karen Hoak, Tracy Cichocki, Catherine Walsh

DATE: 10 January, 2023

RE: Christmas Blizzard 2022

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Public Works played a vital role in all phase of the emergency response to the Christmas Blizzard 2022. This memo will illustrate the planning process, supply of critical services during the response and recovery operations, and ideas to help mitigate gaps in future in the future.

## Planning

Interagency coordination, communications, and collaboration are critical to an effective and efficient response. The planning for this event started in DPW, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December; with NWS, Labor Relations, Emergency Services and contract forces.

The timing of the event, near Christmas holiday, made this even more challenging. Communications from DPW, Personnel and Labor Relations mitigated any employee no shows with an MOU allowing for additional pay on Christmas Day to ensure we had adequate coverage. The MOU incentivized and rewarded the employees to be available and on the job since the contract would have only rewarded employees who came into work on December 26<sup>th</sup>.

DPW reached out to EC DHSES on the 19<sup>th</sup> to prepare all the Highway districts with cots and blankets. Unfortunately, the supplies did not make it to all the districts in time for the storm. EMS required a ticket be created in DLAN for the supplies and they would then deliver. One of the gaps was no having overtime pre-storm for EMS employees to make the deliveries or allowing the Highway staff to pick up the supplies.

Food was procured for all the Highway districts, which needs to be a priority in future response. This has been a challenge getting approval. All the Highways facilities are equipped with food preparation facilities, to include the new facility when it is constructed. The Highway facilities tend to feed not just its employees, but all the ECSO road deputies and in some cases, first responders for the duration of the event.

- Lesson learned, we need to procure food for a minimum of 72 hours. The supplies we purchased only lasted about 48 hours.

Buildings and Grounds staff, faced similar issues as the districts, being stuck in some cases for days due to road conditions in the City. We did not procure any food for them, but it is something, along with cots and blankets that needs to be addressed in the future. B&G does have limited access to food from the Holding Center in the event they can not obtain food, but this should not be a normal procedure.

Equipment, has been an area in both Highway and B&G to increase. Highways has a need for specialized snow blowers, albeit, at a cost of \$1 million. The districts will be adjusting the base line for high lifts from the 2 they have now to 4 as a minimum. The need and use of a high lift were priceless in the past two events of 2022. B&G has to increase the plowing equipment as well; Bobcats with snow blowers, plow trucks and even small high lifts need to be acquired.

- Rath Bldg., Public Safety, Fire Training and Holding Center have to have high lifts and personnel to operate them during snow events.

The pre-event planning conversation with the contractors is very helpful and proved to be successful. The conversation started about 72 hours before the storm and possible pre-employment of equipment. The contractors can not be engaged until a State of Emergency is declared; in the future an early SOE would be helpful. In the future, DPW will be looking into ways to have visibility of the pieces of equipment, using technology for the dashboard viewer in the EOC, such as using Air Tags or AVLS. This will allow for real time information in the EOC and mapping capabilities.

DPW, planning for future events, staffing in the EOC need to be addressed. The limited activation was problematic for DPW. Staff needed were stuck in the City of Buffalo for days, DPW has to have more representation, in person, like B&G and DLAN ticket reviewers. Using staff in charge of Operations or Logistics from EMS (or other departments) did not work well. Roles within ICS really need to be filled by DPW personnel, there were multiple gaps with answering tickets or developing Task Forces.

- We need to offer additional DLAN training for employees and consider providing ICS training upon hiring for all DPW employees.

### **Operational/Recovery**

DPW was able to coordinate efforts in the field opening roads, securing utilities and lifelines, managing environmental and safety hazards, assessing damages, and securing facilities. The top priority of DPW was preservation of life and public health, followed by public services.

23 December at 0730 hrs. rain changed to snow and driving ban was in place at 0930 hrs. Blizzard conditions in the effected areas began at 0840 hrs. on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and ended at 0105 hrs. on 25<sup>th</sup>, over 40 hours. DPW-Highways had 40 plows and 5 high lifts on the road. Equipment was reduced for 12-hour period due to zero visibility in the Harlem and Clarence Highway districts.

DPW had 30 contractor high lifts working in Harlem and Clarence Districts starting at 2200 hrs. on 23<sup>rd</sup> along with DPW-HWYS crews. At the same time, Task Forces were set up with a loader assigned to Buffalo Fire and a loader with BPD. By noon on the 24<sup>th</sup>; contractors had 40 high lifts; 18 loaders County line in Clarence to Clinton Street, 15 loaders in Amherst/Clarence Center area, and 7 in Cheektowaga and areas west of Transit Rd. 1445 hrs. on the 24<sup>th</sup> a Task Force was set up with Utility Crews and high lifts to open sub stations for power in the City of Buffalo, (the first time I talked with City of Buffalo DPW Commissioner).

EC DPW created its own task force at 2030 hrs. on 24 Dec to keep Mercy Hospital, Abbott Rd, and Seneca Street open. This task force included assistance from the City of Buffalo Police Department as well as the Buffalo Fire Department. The goal was to make one lane plus open for emergency service vehicles to gain access to the Holding Center and Buffalo Niagara corridor, including Elm and Oak Street to North Street. This objective was accomplished by 0800 hrs. on 25 Dec. Another mission within this task force was to hire and dispatch mechanics to repair 12 abandoned fire trucks in the City of Buffalo (due to the cold weather the diesel in the trucks had gelled after they had to be abandoned in the blizzard).

NYS DOT and NYS Police coordinated another Task Force at 2100 hrs., 24 Dec, in a coordinated call with EC DPW and EC DESHS, to assist the City of Buffalo with search and rescue efforts.

EC DPW – HWYS, along with contract forces, had all County roads open and 497 vehicles towed by 1900 hrs. on 25 Dec 2022. Of those 497 vehicles, 306 cars were towed in the portion of the City of Buffalo that the County took over responsibility for clearing out (namely the Southeast portion of the City described below). Simultaneously, DPW assisted with efforts to open roads and escort ECSO to get dialysis patients to their appointments. The City of Buffalo called in their contractor, Veracelli, who would have 30 pieces of equipment operating by 26<sup>th</sup>. 27 Dec the City of Buffalo set a goal of having one lane open all streets with in 48 hrs. on all City streets. NYS DOT Albany called in additional resources and set up a staging area at Buffalo State College. This was a huge logistical issue for DPW; there

was no coordination with DPW on needs from NYS DOT. In the end, EC DPW had to provide to fuel to all the contract ambulances that came to the City as well as all public and private equipment that was staged at Buffalo State, without any coordination with DPW.

This Buffalo State Task force and county contractor working the entire area of the City from Broadway south to the Lake, took till 30 December. DPW could not demobilize any of the contractors or crews until Buffalo State was fully demobilized on 31 December. The final count on County directed assets was 139 trucks, 74 loaders and over 50,000 gallons of fuel.

### **Mitigation**

The mission is to reduce the potential impact on the community from future disasters, to life and property. The mitigation plans should be a continual planning process and overlap of other emergency management missions. NIMS has a component of Command Management, Multiagency Coordination System (MACS). MACS, allows all levels of government and all disciplines to work together more efficiently and effectively.

DPW continues to assess damages in the buildings, equipment and document invoices. The Budget department has set up accounts and funds approved by the Legislature, so we can start paying invoices. Contractors are gathering their documentation and it is expected, those bills will be paid within the month.

DPW, will continue to invest in technology, building management systems, to have real time information for buildings, similar to Highways dashboard. There are positions needed within DPW; most importantly at the ME's Office a Stationary Engineer. DPW could benefit by having an Emergency Manager position full time, similar to NYS DOT has. DPW will develop training plans and update those on yearly basis for DLAN.

Before, during and after an emergency, Public Works is the lifeline of the community.

**Erie County Department of Health**  
**After Action Review – December 2022 Blizzard**

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## After Action Report

This document was written at the request of County Executive Mark Poloncarz. This report collects information and data from Erie County Department of Health (ECDOH) divisions and staff who participated in Erie County's response to the December 2022 Blizzard (December 23-24, 2022). It may also include observations from and lessons learned from a previous winter storm, around November 17, 2022.

These observations were compiled with a strong willingness to contribute to improvements in departmental operations and the county's emergency response.

Recommendations from this report center on life safety issues, Medical Examiner's Office operations, SNOW line calls, approaches to improve communications and the department's efforts for planning, preparation, response, recovery for future severe winter weather events.

One fundamental question that arose from this storm: **how can Erie County encourage a culture of resilience among residents and healthcare facilities?** The answer will require involvement from community groups, other departments and healthcare administration, and sustained efforts to address with messaging, education and physical resources.

Localized community mutual aid responses to meet basic needs were strong and organically managed. For example, a "Bills Mafia" initiative to bring snowblowers and shovelers to clear driveways and sidewalks in Buffalo's hardest-hit areas was a very visible volunteer-organized response. Erie County was able to support this effort with the National Guard for safety operations. Direct efforts to collaborate with informal community groups, self-identified mutual aid leaders and other spontaneous volunteer efforts are warranted.

Another pressing question: **how can we strengthen EOC operations and make them conform to ICS/FEMA standards?** Staff identified a lack of preparation, structure and organization at the EOC. This calls for further education for all potential EOC staff in the Incident Command System, perhaps with an outside facilitator, to get Erie County "back to basics" on the foundations of this FEMA-recommended framework. And, it calls for drills and table-top exercises to keep this top of mind for key staff.

## Incident Overview

Erie County experienced 36 hours of sustained blizzard conditions from December 23-24, 2022. This storm surpassed the famed Blizzard of '77 in duration and loss of life. These extreme winter weather conditions of sub-zero windchills, hurricane-force winds and relentless lake effect snow impacted travel, utilities (power, heat), public works (snow removal) and – critically – emergency response (fire, police, ambulance).

This weather event occurred over the Christmas holiday weekend, disrupting activities for nearly all residents. Road conditions and holiday plans affected both EOC healthcare facility staffing. Drivers took to the roads during a driving advisory and a driving ban to go to or return home from work, shop, or for holiday travel. Hundreds of abandoned vehicles caused havoc on highways, arterial roads and side streets once plows were able to resume operations. Those trapped drivers faced awful decisions about staying in a freezing vehicle or attempting to reach shelter in deadly blizzard conditions.

Thousands of residents were stranded away from their homes or workplaces, and tens of thousands of residents experienced power and heat loss that caused uncomfortable, uncertain, and in some cases, life-threatening circumstances. At least 43 storm-related deaths have been confirmed by the Erie County Medical Examiner's Office as of this writing.

# Emergency Medical Services and Public Health Emergency Preparedness

## Strengths

### Resources

Multiple mutual aid teams from NYS and other municipalities supported EMS and first responders.

Task Forces came together to coordinate response and transport. A snow plow would be paired with fire and ambulance equipment to respond to calls. Creative solutions were developed quickly and in the field to facilitate transport and maximize efficiency. Some patients were transported to hospitals by fly cars or via UTV to an ambulance on a relatively cleared street.

Therapy dogs from were brought in for dispatchers' mental health support. PSAPs from other jurisdictions were available to manage phone work. Dispatchers worked out of the PSC (Public Safety Campus) and from a room at the EOC. At EOC they worked next to Buffalo Fire Department, which worked out well for real-time coordination.

NYS Fire and EMS were brought in for additional and welcomed support.

### Nurse Navigator

EMS used a Nurse Navigator resource through AMR ambulance service. This out-of-state resource triaged low-priority calls that could be handled with at-home management, with an expectation that transport to a hospital, urgent care or private physician would be available within 48 hours. An example would be for a 9-1-1 caller who had pain from a twisted ankle and no other apparent injuries (uncontrolled bleeding, head injury). The nurse could explain how to alleviate pain and avoid further injury until they could access medical treatment. The nurse navigators addressed about 20% of calls that would usually have prompted an ambulance response.

### Hospitals

Relatively quickly, the process fell into place for hospitals to communicate their essential employee lists to the EOC for transport.

When able to travel, ambulances transported patients to the nearest hospital - not necessarily their preferred hospital. Kenmore Mercy Hospital and DeGraff Memorial, north of the city, experienced increased ambulance volume.

### Dialysis and Life-sustaining Transport; Prescription Medication and Delivery

Though some disruption to life-sustaining treatments like dialysis was expected, actual conditions were worse. 9-1-1/858-SNOW were able to prioritize dialysis transport requests based on severity (time since last treatment) and location (individuals stuck in vehicles on the road were high priority; individuals at a hospital had access to care and were not scheduled for transport). EOC provided a one-way ride to a treatment center - not a round-trip service. This maximized our transport capacity, and we were not endangering patients by returning them to homes over treacherous roads or to a home without power.

Some patients had to stay overnight at some dialysis centers. Dispatchers explained to patients and centers that they would not return patients to their homes after their dialysis sessions. Administrators at these sites were not pleased and often not prepared with food or cots/blankets.

EMS communicated early on with methadone clinics of storm severity, with a request to give patients extra doses as appropriate so that treatment was not compromised. Catholic Health opened its sites in Buffalo and Amherst to patients needing methadone as an alternative to going to an emergency room.

## Areas for Improvement

### Staffing

The Christmas holiday contributed to some staff not wanting to be scheduled or insisting on working from home when they could not perform their duties at home. Road and weather conditions and power outages prevented others from fully participating in EOC operations and the response.

There is no replacement for face-to-face interaction at the EOC and ESF desks. Remote resources may not be considered or considered too late. Checking in mutual aid ambulances, for example, should require an in-person interaction and live inspection of the vehicle, equipment, radios and a thorough briefing and mission assignment. That didn't happen with all shifts for mutual aid. EMS mutual aid ambulances were checked in in-person. Fire resources were told to go to scene. AMR told EMS to send mutual aid ambulances to AMR which caused EMS to lose visibility of mutual aid ambulances.; that's where the breakdown happened.

### Municipal Mutual Aid

Mutual aid resources were overutilized compared to local resources, and local resources were underutilized. It varied in some cases; the mutual aid ambulance took 22 calls in a shift, and AMR took three. Other times, mutual aid ambulances just sat at a fire station and were never given a call. Ways to improve coordination should be examined and adopted in the future.

### Hospitals

Hospitals, in general, had unrealistic expectations about patient discharge during a driving ban. Some hospital staff also had unrealistic expectations about the ability of emergency resources to transport them to or from their workplace.

### Response

For approximately 18 hours, EMS response were suspended. This was an unexpected circumstance that took a tremendous toll on ambulance crews and dispatchers who have a culture of responding regardless of the conditions. The weather and road conditions were just too dangerous for travel.

### Operational Periods

The 8-hour operational period was not ideal. Though it was a good attempt to accommodate individual holiday plans, travel to-and-from most homes was not feasible or safe for many at the EOC. Transport required using resources that might have otherwise been deployed in other ways. A 16- or 24-hour operational period would have been a better choice.

### Demobilization

The demobilization announcement came as a surprise to EMS staff, as their operations were ongoing with mutual aid teams still in the field. This decision was communicated without this divisions' input.

## Recommendations

### Staffing

Erie County employees assigned to the EOC should be fully briefed on how long they should expect to be on-call/on duty. EOC staffing should start with the level of on-site staff that the planning and conditions called for - not basing shift times on holiday plans.

Develop EMS/PHEP staff as resources for operations and logistics. For example, with the ME's Office instead of calling in outside contractors.

### Transport

Consider options to put Senior Services/municipal ride service vans into use. For example, these vehicles could be used to transport dialysis patients home from centers once roads are clear and safe for travel.

### Functional Needs Registry

DHSES maintains a Functional Needs Registry for self-identified individuals with conditions, disabilities or specific needs. Emergencies and disasters may put these individuals at additional risk because of power outages, lack of transportation options (e.g., dialysis patients, individuals who depend on oxygen tanks). Consider how this registry is incorporated into emergency response, how that registry is communicated to municipal emergency managers, and how the public is informed about this registry.

### Hospitals and Healthcare Centers

EMS should communicate the need for hospitals and healthcare centers to review and revise their emergency plans and how they interact with staffing, supplies and shelter for patients, staff and families. In a snow emergency with the potential for driving bans and dangerous road conditions, employees should have a "go bag" of at least 4 days of clothes, snacks and personal items. Hospitals should stock an emergency supply of nonperishable and frozen foods for future similar emergency situations.

Hospital EMs should advise staff that once on site, travel home may not be possible. In extreme weather situations, hospitals should have contingency plans to house/maintain discharged patients and their visitors, stranded staff and walk-ins from the community.

In blizzard conditions, dialysis patients should be advised to bring a "go bag" to the dialysis center that should include clothes, personal items, blankets and snacks. This advisement should be given in November before snowfall begins and reinforced with dangerous weather condition predictions.

## Medical Examiner's Office

### Strengths

### Operations

Decedents were identified in a reasonable amount of time, especially given the circumstances.

Having the Commissioner of Health working on site to assist with incoming body processing, securing resources and providing EOC with situational awareness was helpful.

EMS securing resources, such as assisting with making DLAN and NYS Response requests, lodging for out-of-town staff, and food for MEO, was very helpful. This process should be started at storm onset if it is identified as a potential need through the planning process.

Administrative staff were available and receiving calls off-site. Staff worked non-stop for a week with recovery, investigations, examinations and notifications.

While managing the caseload of mass fatalities from the storm event, the ME's Office handled five cases of children who perished in a house fire, overdoses, traffic fatalities, and any other cases falling under ME jurisdiction.

ME's Office benefited from mutual aid response from Rensselaer and Onondaga counties. These were trained staff who were able to assimilate into office operations with ease.

National Guard personnel were professional, thorough and effective.

Buffalo Police were very helpful in terms of recovering decedents and supporting scene investigators. Future mass fatality plans need to include all agencies involved.

Area hospitals accepted decedents found by police to store in their morgues until they filled with patients who died in the hospital.

## Areas for Improvement

### Site Security and Safety

Staff relied on the NWS forecast to decide to close the office in advance of the storm. With the possibility of power and phone outages, working off-site/at home would preserve staff safety and continued operations. The ME's Office is not set up for a shelter-in-place situation. Although the office is on the ECMC campus, ECMC typically does not address building access (snow clearance), security (unsecured doors) and maintenance in a timely fashion, if at all.

The ME's Office needs better physical barriers to control access. In the recent past, families looking for personal property have attempted to access the ME's Office. This facet of the response could have been addressed by a Safety Office under ICS. This was also an issue during the mass shooting response.

### Transport

Hospitals were inflexible and complained that their morgues were out of space and they were overwhelmed. This was because of the inability of funeral homes to claim bodies during the storm, not necessarily because of storm-related deaths. Appeals to hospitals to hold decedents until the weather cleared were not considered once their morgues filled. Hospitals need a backup plan to store their bodies.

Some decedents were brought to the ME's Office in private vehicles. Some decedents were in private homes for several days before transport could be arranged. These were highly unusual and unprecedented circumstances.

Police attempted to deviate from normal practice by dropping off bodies at ME's Office or the refrigerated trailer at the EOC without clearing with the MEO and obtaining a tracking number for the body.

## Administrative/Data

Data reporting for storm-related deaths was cumbersome. MEO should explore acquiring analytics software.

Storm-related death data was shared with the media too freely throughout storm event. More secure consistent system should be developed to share mass fatality death data.

## Storage

Because of construction, the ME's Office had a second body storage refrigerator available for storage with 18 spaces. If this storm had occurred one week later, that refrigerator would not have been available. State resources take two days or more to secure. The ME's Office needs its own trailer on ECMC property. Discussions need to occur as soon as possible.

## Vendors

Contracted staff assigned to the ME's Office did not understand or respect existing procedures and alienated ME's Office and mutual aid staff. This resulted in confusion, deviation from normal procedures and extra work for the ME's Office.

## Coordination

IAPs and organizational charts were not drafted or disseminated, which led to confusion at the ME's Office about contracted staff duties and the appropriate chain of command to reach the IC. This was an issue for staff involved with the whole operation. There were no briefings before or at the end of operational periods.

## Demobilization

The demobilization announcement came as a surprise to ME staff as their operations were ongoing with non-storm-related cases. This decision should have been made in consultation with the ME's Office and communicated better to this office.

## Recommendations

### Security and Operations

Evaluate and address day-to-day safety and site security at the ME's Office. Consider security concerns during planning phase of any emergency response.

Plan for redundancies in power/phone/internet access.

Coordinate snow clearance and other facility needs with ECMC campus.

### Mass Fatality Plan

Review, revise and rehearse mass fatality plan. Erie County needs an updated mass fatality plan with input from relevant Erie County departments and offices, hospitals, funeral directors, and NSYDOH. Because it is a complicated plan and involves so many different agencies, we believe the best approach is to hire a consultant to write a comprehensive plan involving all parties. ME's Office heard comments about DMORT. DMORT require state approval and cost sharing, and is not a realistic expectation or option for disasters on the scale of this blizzard. DMORT response takes roughly two weeks to implement.

## Storage

Work with ECMC on an MOU for trailer storage in a mutually acceptable and accessible ECMC campus location. Build in maintenance costs in the ME's budget. Consider purchasing a refrigerator trailer equipped to store bodies for future emergencies.

Hospital system needs a plan to handle body overflow that doesn't rely on the ME.

## Task Delegation

For future events, requests for resources, personnel, coordination of family reunification or family support sites, or accommodation for mutual aid staff should be directed through the EOC/ICS and result communicated back to ME's Office.

## Staffing

Develop relationships with EMS/PHEP staff to support emergency response. EMS/PHEP staff or MRC (SMART) volunteers could assist with scribing for ME's office. People in this role should not be expected to assist with direct contact with decedents.

Include division and department leadership in discussions on bringing in outside vendors/contractors to assist.

## Other

During our internal review, the ME's Office identified that when organizations conduct active shooter drills, their office should be incorporated into those events.

More secure consistent data analytics system should be developed to share mass fatality death data.

# Communications

## Strengths

### Timing

CE Poloncarz and senior administration officials (Health, DPW, DHSES) held a press briefing on Thursday afternoon to communicate anticipated storm severity per the NWS Buffalo forecast, school closures, preparation recommendations and safety messages. CE staff and designated PIOs outlined communication roles for duration of storm response with some working from home or off-site and some scheduled for EOC.

Subsequent press briefings were well-timed (morning and afternoon; daily). Timely responses made for media inquiries and local, national and international media requests.

### Messages

National Weather Service bulletins were dire, descriptive and adequately timed. Their message did not reach all Erie County population.

Erie County produced coordinated messages for social media, media (press conferences) and the Erie County web site. Safety messages for carbon monoxide poisoning, staying warm in a home without heat, and appeals to stay indoors and off the roads were continuously shared.

EOC team monitored social media and media. Media monitoring uncovered misinformation about National Guard resources that was able to be addressed quickly through a response on social media.

ReadyErie: The ReadyErie app was updated regularly with driving ban information, safety messages and video content from press briefings.

## Access

With ASL interpreters unable to travel to the EOC, the PIO team adjusted by directing interpreters to upload video recordings of the press conference interpretations soon after each briefing. These were then uploaded to YouTube and ReadyErie (video section). The flexibility of WNY Deaf Access Services and their ASL interpreters on this point was greatly appreciated.

Advance notice was given to Niagara Radio Reading Service of 858-SNOW availability for blind/low-vision residents.

## Staff

PIOs worked on-site and off-site. Social media content managers included people at the EOC and individuals off-site and, in one case, out of town (and thus not impacted by storm/power outage conditions).

## Areas for Improvement

### Internal Communication

EOC did not follow the ICS structure and operations as recommended by FEMA. Face-to-face interaction at the EOC is a crucial element for effective coordination. It is easier to scale back operations and staffing if conditions warrant.

ICS recommends regular briefing at shift changes or other clearly noted intervals. ICS also recommends IAPs at the beginning of operational periods. ICs did not hold briefings. Even if EOC is hybrid/virtual, briefings or daily calls for EOC operations would improve situational awareness and facilitate coordination.

IAPs were not written or distributed. This hindered situational awareness, caused confusion and may have led to EOC staff acting outside their defined roles to ensure that tasks were completed.

### Coordination

All county social media channels could have helped in sharing and amplifying key county safety messages.

Individual or group outreach to community leaders could have emphasized the potential severity of this storm.

### Messages

ReadyErie: One person updated content (no planned redundancy). Push notifications not necessarily enabled on all end users phones. ReadyErie has a limited reach. If ReadyErie is to be used in future emergencies, there should be a comprehensive county-wide campaign to educate residents on when and how this resource is used, how to turn on

notifications, and how to access the app's information. Content should be templated to make updating faster and easier, and a plan should be in place for content review before posting to make sure messages are consistent, accurate and timely.

Residents who lost power had difficulty in accessing County messages through social media, television and radio.

Aside from American Sign Language, Erie County did not provide safety messages in languages other than English.

Erie County warnings that communicated the storm magnitude and severity and how to prepare did not reach many Erie County residents through their normal communication channels. Though not used, the Emergency Broadcast System or a county-wide text to all active cell phones could have signaled the severity and timing of storm conditions, life hazards if going outdoors, and a direct appeal to shelter in place.

## Access

Niagara Frontier Radio Reading Service and other opportunities for outreach to vulnerable communities and individuals with disabilities should be considered.

Consider live "hits" or pre-recorded messages with safety messages and updates for radio stations to play – especially if a significant number of people are without power, stranded in vehicles or at places other than their homes.

## Staff

Key social media personnel lost power, which impacted their ability to participate in the communications response. Note: these individuals went above and beyond in making every effort to access power and internet while dealing with very challenging home circumstances. This highlights the need for redundancy and cross-training for personnel, and multiple means of accessing social media channels.

## Recommendations

Truckers and travelers from out of the area may not access the local and traditional media channels that Erie County use to communicate driving bans, storm conditions and risk.

As resources allow, assign a staff/PIO resource to monitor social media (Reddit, Discord, Facebook, Twitter) for real-time reporting from residents. Their focus should be identifying misinformation for correction, needed and priority safety messages, and intelligence that informs DPW, EMS and fire/police response.

Consider public-address announcements from emergency vehicles in densely populated areas.

In order to better use ReadyErie in future weather emergencies, Erie County should develop and communicate a comprehensive county-wide campaign to educate residents on when and how ReadyErie is used, how to turn on notifications, and how to access the app's information. Content should be templated to make updating faster and easier. Develop a for content review before posting to make sure messages are consistent, accurate and timely.

Explore using the Emergency Broadcast System or a county-wide text to all active cell phones could have signaled the severity and timing of storm conditions, life hazards if going outdoors, and a direct appeal to shelter in place.

Explore using the Niagara Frontier Radio Reading Service and other opportunities for outreach to vulnerable communities and individuals with disabilities.

Explore using live “hits” or pre-recorded messages with safety messages and updates for radio stations to play – especially if a significant number of people are without power, stranded in vehicles or at places other than their homes.

Consider establishing and promoting the Winter Weather Safety page earlier (October) and promoting it heavily to community groups. This would include practical tips on building emergency kits or home, vehicles and work; how to shelter-in-place; home safety (carbon monoxide, dangers of heating with gas stoves, fire safety).

Review and revise crisis communications plans.

Participate in local/online ICS training for PIOs.

PIOs participate in drills and table-top exercises to test plans.

Add streaming capability at EOC to allow for ASL interpreter, visual aids to be presented on-screen during press briefings.

## 858-SNOW and DisasterLAN

### Strengths

858-SNOW Provided residents and businesses/organizations with an all-hours resource for questions and information. Policy group staff identified and on-boarded call takers and provided a resource document.

### Areas for Improvement

The expectations for the SNOW line diverged drastically from what actually happened. The line was nearly immediately overwhelmed. There was no way to anticipate the volume of response. Need to develop a decision tree for when to activate SNOW line (or equivalent, HELP line). Also, need to plan how to recruit, train and manage call takers.

As overflow for 9-1-1 callers who could not get through or who were unsatisfied with the 9-1-1 response, this SNOW line was responsible for many DLAN tickets; some were duplicates of 9-1-1 calls.

Some call input from SNOW line call takers had incomplete/missing information that was key to coordinating a response (e.g., call back phone number, name, address).

An algorithm for triaging calls and coordinated response was needed. Need to continue discussions with 2-1-1 to coordinate responses and with Erie County DISS on technical options for text messaging, onboarding call takers, and adding SNOW phone lines on site at the EOC.

A backlog of DLAN tickets grew; the EOC manager handling DLAN tickets did not always have a place to send those tickets.

There is a need for regular, ongoing DLAN training and clearly established EOC managers and ESF desks responsibilities. Before each storm there is a rush of people who forgot their passwords, log on and need refreshers on use and updates. Training is a key part of planning and preparation, and this needs to be a priority.

### Recommendations

Communicate types of calls that are appropriate for SNOW.

Identify and train call takers; determine their willingness and availability prior to an anticipated weather event or check in on a regular basis.

Reactivate the Administration Assistance Team. This was a group of county staff trained in DLAN to take calls during and emergency.

Train any call takers related to a response in protocols/process, and importance of collecting complete information on the call. Call takers/dispatchers should also communicate to dialysis patients that transport to a facility is one-way, and they should be prepared with food/medicines to stay at that facility until road conditions improve.

Prepare to provide mental health resources for call takers during and after their response.

Consider earlier and more frequent coordination with 2-1-1 and 3-1-1.

Develop algorithms for triaging calls and coordinated response. Continue discussions with 2-1-1 to coordinate responses and with Erie County DISS on technical options for text messaging, onboarding call takers, and adding SNOW phone lines virtually or on site at the EOC.

Conduct regular, ongoing, DLAN training to prevent people from forgetting their passwords, how to log on and how to use, and updates. Clearly establish EOC managers and ESF desk responsibilities with regular shift changeovers. EOC manager is the most important role at the EOC. The person or persons assigned to that role should have one function: triaging DLAN tickets so they are pushed to appropriate EOC functional area/ESF desk. Without an IAP, no one knew which roles were filled and which roles were not.

## Miscellaneous

The Buffalo News suspended print delivery during the storm; television and radio reporters were limited in their ability to travel and report on location. The video updates provided through the Erie County YouTube channel were highly viewed in comparison to other county broadcasts and in some cases were streamed on local TV stations.

Some social media posts included comments that the Cattaraugus Territory should be noted on the GIS maps that were produced. Recommendation: Label Cattaraugus Territory and Seneca Territory with their preferred labels.

Dozens of ad hoc warming shelters were established and used in the city of Buffalo during and after the storm. Not all official city of Buffalo warming shelters had power. Balancing the messages of “if you are outside, get inside” with “here are the warming shelter sites” was a challenge, as people who were relatively safe in an unheated home might have attempted to reach a shelter – whether by road or on foot, both would put their lives at risk.

## Participating ECDOH Staff

Commissioner of Health Dr. Gale Burstein  
Deputy Commissioner of Health Joseph Abdulla  
Executive Assistant to the Commissioner of Health Jason Hurley  
Public Information Officer Kara Kane

Deputy Commissioner of Health (EMS/PHEP) Gregory Gill

Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Tara Mahar  
Deputy Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Katherine Maloney  
Medical Examiner’s Office Division Director Janinne Blank  
Medical Investigator James McClure

## Acronyms

AAR	After Action Report
CE	Erie County Executive
DHSES	Erie County Department of Homeland Security & Emergency Services
DLAN	DisasterLAN
ECDOH	Erie County Department of Health
EMS	Emergency Medical Services
EOC	Emergency Operations Center
IC/ICS	Incident Command/Incident Command System
MERS	Medical Emergency Radio System
NIMS	National Incident Management System
NWS	National Weather Service – Buffalo
PHEP	Public Health Emergency Preparedness
PIO	Public Information Officer



**MEMORANDUM  
COUNTY OF ERIE  
DEPT. OF DPW- HIGHWAYS**

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Benjamin Swanekamp, Chief of Staff  
William Geary, DPW Commissioner

FROM: Karen Hoak, Deputy Commissioner Highways

DATE: January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023

RE: Christmas Blizzard 2022  
December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022- December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022

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**This is the second weather related incident response I've participated in during my time with Erie County. Both extreme weather events occurred within 5 weeks of each other giving me an opportunity to reflect on how we manage operations in Erie County and specifically within the Department of Public Works Highway Division.**

**Preparedness**

**Our leadership in the maintenance districts does a great job of coordinating staffing, readying equipment and all tasks necessary to manage snowfall in WNY. When it comes to planning for what is likely a new norm of extreme weather events we could improve upon our practices by coordinating with Emergency services to equip each districts with the items necessary to continue working in critical situations. The department could establish a check list for the District Engineers to ensure each facility has what they need in the event there are several employees sleeping and working out of one location for days at a time. Some of the cots that**

were acquired in 2014 have been damaged do to being stored in inadequate spaces. Having a one stop shop or one stop drop off for these essential items would help eliminate any scramble. As we begin to improve an replace Highway Facilities we need to incorporate an extreme weather event lens to design. Additionally, within our department we could improve planning for food in these circumstances. We were able to stock each district up with a couple days of groceries ahead of time but could do better back up planning in the future.

It would be beneficial to create a tangible document titled “DPW Operating Procedures for Extreme Weather Response”. This could be a resource for training and tailgate talks ahead of extreme weather events.

### Communication

We excelled at communication during both storms. I attribute this to the accountability and situational awareness that is promoted by using WeatherEvents. Our District Engineers are experienced in managing operations and using WeatherEvents as a communication tool and the Dashboard as visual support is key to our success. For the most part the DE’s know what warrants a phone call and most stay in touch as needed via text or call to keep me informed of operations.

### Collaboration

At the EOC, collaboration is key and seems to be a successful element of our response in many ways. Collaboration between County departments and many agencies is well established but with other agencies we need better in roads. It was good to have a City of Buffalo representative on site after the Blizzard but would have been far more beneficial to have them in place ahead of time given their lack of emergency command structure.

### Equipment

After the last two weather events it is clear we are leagues ahead of most municipalities with our fleet. We are in great shape thanks to the investment and support over the past 10+ years. We have started to discuss and need to plan for continuing to invest and acquire specialized equipment for these weather events.

### Feedback not related to DPW operations

I’ve participated in three ICS emergency responses this year, Jefferson Massacre, November Storm and Christmas Blizzard. It’s an honor to be entrusted as part of the team and each incident has been transformative for me, professionally and personally. Each incident has also served as a clear reminder on the importance of solid leadership and I am very proud to have witnessed remarkable leadership by this administration. We are better because we know we can always do better and that leads me to share a few ideas and observations.

### More training.

Trauma Informed Care training for those who work in an emergency response. Many may not be seen as front line but are often tasked with responding to crisis, in person or on the phone.

Mental Health First Aid Training is an excellent training to provide for anyone who is public

**facing at any time and could be an excellent training to have in the toolbox during times of crisis.**

**Empathy/Equity**

**There is a need for those responding to have a better understanding of the communities we are responding to. Erie County is a geographically, and culturally diverse region and remains very segregated. Community comprehension would provide a better understanding of those you are trying to help. Understanding socio-economic challenges and language barriers specific to certain areas across the region would eliminate challenges that arise in our response. Although it is unrelated to my department, I am compelled to provide feedback because I observed dialogue and in one instance language that was not appropriate given how grave the situation was.**

**\*\*Thank you for providing this opportunity for feedback. I am proud to be part of a team that continues to do incredible work. Happy New Year!\*\***



# MEMORANDUM

## COUNTY OF ERIE

### DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

**TO:** Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Benjamin Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

**FROM:** Marie Cannon, Commissioner, Department of Social Services  
Eric J. Tower, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Department of Social Services

**DATE:** January 13, 2023

**RE: Blizzard of 2022, After Action Discussion in Social Services**

#### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this document is to memorialize the next actions of the Department of Social Services in the area of winter storm emergency response plans after reflection on the Blizzard of 2022.

#### **NEXT ACTIONS FOR SOCIAL SERVICES**

##### Data & Communications

- ⊕ Develop Data for Emergency Communications
  - ◇ Develop TSU plan for data pipeline to get geocoded phone numbers based on client data for direct emergency communications.
  - ◇ Develop TSU plan for data pipeline to get geocoded phone numbers based on employee contact information and work from home status.
  - ◇ Develop emergency CEO or Designee cell phone lists for all provider agencies associated with ECDSS.
  - ◇ Plan for using this list of phone numbers for emergency communications with consideration of client confidentiality laws.
- ⊕ Data Support for Community Preparedness with Division of Health Equity
  - ◇ Assist Department of Health to identify vulnerable populations to distribute Blizzard Boxes to improve emergency preparedness.
- ⊕ Continue to utilize routine ECDSS internal debriefs to discuss the impact of Emergency Operations on DSS systems.

##### Integration with Emergency Operations Center

- ⊕ Emergency Operations Support
  - ◇ Two members of DSS Executive Staff will report to Emergency Operations Center for future activations for high level communication and planning.

- ⊕ Emergency Response Call Center (ERCC) Team
  - ◇ ECDSS is identifying staff to act as an Emergency Call Center Team that can be immediately activated during an emergency.
  - ◇ HRD will provide trauma informed care trainings to the team.
  - ◇ Lend ECDSS expertise in call centers that support people facing heating, food, and other types of emergencies to the development of the 858-SNOW plan.
- ⊕ Address Integration Issues with Department of Emergency Services
  - ◇ Ensure ECDSS is part of the EOC activation list as early as possible so that it can begin to prepare – *it does not appear to be part of the list at this time.*
  - ◇ Inquire about use of Amber Alert, Geofenced Calls for Emergency Information
  - ◇ Inquire about other mass texting ability of Emergency Services to leverage ECDSS client data.

### Emergency De-Escalation & Trauma

- ⊕ Emergency De-Escalation Period
  - ◇ Develop a plan for what needs to occur before the Department transitions back to a non-emergency footing.
    - To Include after action assessment meeting.
    - To Include emergency purchases to improve next response cycle.
- ⊕ Trauma Resources
  - ◇ Develop plan for deploying Trauma Informed Resources to Staff
  - ◇ Develop plan for deploying Trauma Informed Resources to the Community using targeted client data.
  - ◇ Recognition of Staff Actions

### Policy & Procedure Changes

- ⊕ Youth Detention
  - ◇ Meet with Department of Health to develop policy and procedure to ensure mandated 24-hour nursing coverage under 9 NYCRR 180-1.9(b)(6)(iii) for the Youth Detention facility. During the blizzard Youth Detention was without coverage for almost three days. DSS met with DOH this past week and DOH is developing a policy for their staff by next week.
- ⊕ Establish emergency procedure for ECDSS to request mass authorizations when possible, from OTDA during an emergency to allow for approval times to go through Federal authorities.

### Use of Resources

- ⊕ Homeless Services
  - ◇ 20 cots provided by emergency response to DSS to cover emergency shelters were a necessary backup, but were not needed.
- ⊕ Transport to Youth Detention
  - ◇ ECSO were able to assist many Youth Detention workers in getting to the facility to provide coverage. This worked well and may be required in the future during a similar situation.
- ⊕ Welfare Checks on Children by ECSO
  - ◇ Child Welfare coordinated with the ECSO to conduct welfare checks on children as required. This worked well and will be used in future responses.



**MEMORANDUM  
COUNTY OF ERIE  
DEPT. OF MEDICAID INSPECTOR GENERAL**

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County  
Executive

FROM: Mike Szukala - Erie County MIG  
DATE: January 13, 2023

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Memo on “What went well and what did not” from my point of view during the Holiday Storm 2022.

During the storm, I answered the 858-SNOW helpline. I was the only person from my department to perform this task. All my staff did get an email inviting them to participate. They all declined.

[REDACTED]. Katy and John had worked the 858-8585 COVID hotline, and so had the necessary software on their computers, and had some experience dealing with people calling a helpline in a crisis. I did ask them (privately) why they didn’t participate. In both cases, they chose to put family and the holiday first

I was asked if I could work the 858-SNOW helpline on 12/23/2022 at 8:45 PM. Training for the helpline was scheduled for 8 AM on 12/24. I accepted and attended the training. The necessary software was installed on my phone, and I began to take calls later that day. I logged 48 hours either answering or performing follow-up calls for the 858-SNOW line.

- 1) Call Operators. We should have a “core” group of trained people who can be set up to take calls during an emergency. We have that now by default, but we should formalize it.
  - a. This should include setting up software on computers and phones;
  - b. Operator training;
  - c. Establishing supervisors;
  - d. Scheduling. Some people worked overnight, and some put in twelve -

hour shifts. If we had an emergency plan in place, this could be established in advance. At one point, only two people were on the phones after midnight. That was probably enough, but we should have had a more formal schedule. I was asked twice if I could start work at 4 AM. (That's not a typo). **We need to plan better for a 24 hour response.**

- 2) Language. I and others did get calls to the 858-SNOW line from persons who had limited or non-existent English skills. In two cases I know of, people called in and no one knew what language was being spoken. We did get very few non-English calls, but I felt we didn't do enough to prepare for this.
- 3) Call Forms. When a call came in, the operators completed an electronic form. This was a great idea. It clearly listed out what information was needed, there was an option to list calls as High, Medium or Low priority and a comments section for information not otherwise required.
  - a. One problem was if multiple calls came in for the same issue. There was no way to "recall" a submitted form, add new data or remove a submitted form altogether. Those options should be available going forward.
  - b. Operators had no idea what was happening after a form was submitted. It would be good to know, for example, that a task was being addressed.
- 4) The System Worked. The fast-moving nature of the storm required a quick solution. The 858-SNOW line worked. **I am convinced the operators saved lives.**
- 5) **Closing the Rath Building on Friday the 23<sup>rd</sup> probably saved lives.** It prevented people from being stuck in cars on the way to / from work, or being stuck in the Rath Building. It was a good decision.
- 6) If given a choice, I would rather take calls at the Emergency Operations Center than from my home. There is better access to tech support and better access to information at the EOC.
- 7) Some groups/persons referred callers to the 858-SNOW line rather than 911. Some calls were far too serious for the 858-SNOW line.
- 8) I was told at several points that "911 was overwhelmed". I do not know if that was true. If it was, do we need "backup 911 operators"?
- 9) I had two vendors reach out to me during the storm. They had vehicles (dump trucks / bucket loaders) that were needed, but no one reached out to them. **We need to develop a listing of vendors with these kinds of vehicles now, so we have someone to call in a crisis.** (Confidentially, I emailed their numbers to Pat Lucy (Amherst Highway Supervisor) but I know for a fact he never called them.)
- 10) **This will happen again.**



# MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE DEPT. OF PARKS

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Ben Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

FROM: Troy P. Schinzel

DATE: January 6, 2023

RE: Parks Department Blizzard Report

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I. Positives:

- Parks Inter-Department Communication- Prior t the blizzard we started a ten (10) person group text and required staff to check in with daily reports. Used this group throughout the entire event as a way to collectively communicate, ask for resources, solve problems and get a better understanding of how we were doing as a dept.
- Parks/EOC Communication – Seemed extremely reliable and efficient while assisting as a support function/dept. for the EOC.
- Supt’s, Forester and Supervising Park Ranger – EXTREMELY reliable and helpful throughout.
- Park Rangers – role and need during and aftermath was very helpful
- Parks Groomer – Emery Groomer was a tremendous assistance and I would say even essential to the operations of the EOC.

II. Negatives:

- Once again seemingly too many “Essential” staff continue to not report. The reality is with the vagueness of the policy and the severity of the blizzard there is no way to really do too much about it.

III. Other:

- Level at EOC – can that be announced or provided via the Commissioner/Dept Head Text Message? Seemingly we never know unless we are physically at the EOC to hear it firsthand. Certain levels require us to be present (although typically we try to be in parks) but Commissioners would not know when they change.
- Essential Personnel – [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] may be worth discussing and I understand the fuel islands within parks but a risk/reward scenario. Winter Sports should not be justification for such a decision.

- Park Rangers – [REDACTED]
- Groomers – As discussed two (2) additional units should be purchased and utilized at CRP and Sprague. Parks staff can maintain them and 24-48 hours before major snow events the Highway Dept. can relocate them based upon the latest weather report. At that point we can work to provide drivers and assist as directed by the EOC.
- Parks Commissioners – Please let us know if there are other roles or responsibilities where we may be needed? We typically try to collectively make sure all aspects in our areas are being thought of, communicate with daily reports to the CE, use SM to update the public (especially that winter sports are an after thought during major events), solve staff related matters, visit staff in the field (if possible), etc.



# MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE DEPT. OF PERSONNEL

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Ben Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

FROM: Brian Bray

DATE: January 17, 2022

RE: Storm Response

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The Personnel Department did not have any significant issues during the blizzard. The storm in November provided training to Commissioners and supervisors on the work-from-home rules during a storm. In addition, the storm policy was re-written after the November storm, which provided clearer guidance than the previous iteration.

Smaller issues include:

- Policies not in place to handle unique situations, such as employees working several days in a row and sleeping while at work as a result. Labor Relations quickly put together MOUs with the pertinent bargaining units, so it was fine.
- Poor understanding of the various overtime and time system codes in ESS, as well as failure to follow directions. It makes running reports more difficult to quantify storm expenses. Personnel Department should make it easier on employees, possibly simplifying the system.
- Stealing Mindy for the storm and a week or more afterwards to put together the FEMA documents should stop. This work should be done in Emergency Services.



# MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE DEPT. OF PROBATION

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Ben Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

FROM: Michelle A. Olszowy, Commissioner

DATE: January 13, 2023

RE: Departmental "Blizzard" Report

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As the Erie County Probation Department is not 24-hour operations, our feedback will be limited however, we believe it valuable to your integrated after-action report.

In response to your request for feedback, supervisors within the Erie County Probation Department were tasked with consulting with their respective teams for feedback on the recent "blizzard" event to assist in determining concerns, reflect on current procedures and address any outstanding questions. The general feedback received was extremely positive.

The probation department staff expressed appreciation of the County Executive Office's decision and notification on Thursday, 12/22/22 of the closure of county operations for Friday, 12/23/22 which allowed staff ample time to prepare for "work from home" and address personal matters related to the impending storm. The department presently has a phone tree notification system in place which was utilized twice during this event to ensure all department staff were notified of the county operations closure and staff commented that this system worked well.

Approximately two-thirds (106) of our department staff have "Work from Home" agreements and because of this "blizzard" event, were able to address work related matters despite the closure of non-emergency county operations. Although some internal rumbling followed November's snow event regarding the mandate for staff to work from home if signed agreements were on record, no such issues arose during the December event. However, the fact that the December "blizzard" closure lasted three business days did raise some internal issues with staff having available at home the volume of work necessary. To address this concern, department wide emails were issued regarding the availability of recommended on-line training curriculums. This issue will be addressed more thoroughly later this month in our department Operations meeting and suggestions will be solicited for future such

circumstances.

In light of the county wide driving ban issued and closure of other significant partnering entities such as the criminal and family courts, and local treatment agencies, the department did not need to coordinate or communicate with these entities to reschedule appearances, meetings, etc. However, when driving bans were lifted in certain parts of Erie County on Tuesday, 12/27/22 and not in others, department staff did need to notify a small number of entities/agencies of our department's expected absence on 12/28/22. The Erie County Probation Department partners with several area treatment agencies and local jurisdictions for use of their facilities to enable us to meet with individuals on probation supervision in locations within the probationer's neighborhood. The department did reach out to these entities/agencies on 12/27/22 and 12/28/22 to communicate this anticipated absence.

On 12/28/22 the county's Personnel Department issued information to county department heads regarding the ability to be flexible with leave requests and the "Work from Home" policy for Thursday, 12/29/22 in light of the significant personal circumstances some of our staff might be experiencing. This intervention was viewed by staff as sensitive, supportive, and was very much appreciated. Thank you!

Lastly, please note that despite resumed county operations on 12/29/22 and the absence of a driving ban, the Erie County Probation Department did issue directive to its staff based on the volume of residual snow, to limit all "field" work which necessitated travel into the communities to only essential matters. This directive was effective for both 12/29 and 12/30/22 and had no significant effect on department operations.

It is my hope that the above noted information is beneficial to your objective and as always, please do not hesitate to contact me should you need any additional information.



# MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE DEPT. OF REAL PROPERTY TAX SERVICES

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Benjamin Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

FROM: Scott Bylewski

DATE: January 13, 2023

RE: Blizzard December 2022 After Action Report (AAR)

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Pursuant to the County Executive's e-mail of January 5, 2023, please accept this memo as the "Blizzard After Action Report" for the Department of Real Property Tax Services (RPTS). The format is two areas RPTS can improve upon and two areas RPTS should "sustain" or do more of:

I. Two Improves

1. Communication regarding closings. There was some confusion given the City of Buffalo's driving ban and whether the Rath Building was open (on the last day of the driving ban). Guidance was first given that the Rath Building would be open, but then the City announced the ban was still in effect. Communicated with Personnel Commission Brian Bray along with the TV news link provided to my by RPTS staff regarding the City and we held tight until we could hear more.
2. Tax bills and sewers. We needed the sign-offs from Sewers regarding the sewer tax bill amounts. Sewers could not access the sign off forms / information remotely, so RPTS's Tax Prep & Admin section continued processing as much as they could from home until Sewers could provide the signed-off upon information.

II. Two Sustains

1. Although Communication is an area we can improve upon as it relates to closings, overall, RPTS kept staff well informed.
2. Work from home policy allowed the Tax Prep and Administration section of RPTS to continue preparing tax bills for review.



# MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE DEPT. OF SENIOR SERVICES

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Benjamin Swanekamp, Chief of Staff

FROM: Angela J. Marinucci

DATE: January 13, 2023

RE: Storm Response Report

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## I. NUTRITION

- **PREP:**
  - Congregate dining closed for Friday, 12/23 (announced on Thursday, 12/22); Monday was the pre-scheduled holiday.
  - Home-Delivered Meal clients (Meals on Wheels) received “Blizzard Boxes” of shelf-stable meals to cover Friday – Monday.
- **DURING:**
  - Kept in regular contact with FeedMore, KenTon, and Amherst beginning on Sunday for a planned Tuesday reopening.
  - Initial issues with FeedMore once again needing to be plowed out (like November Storm), and then volunteer / driver delays and inability to traverse Buffalo roads.
  - Only KenTon (Town of Tonawanda) was able to open for congregare as scheduled on Tuesday. KenTon also completed normal Home-Delivered Meals.
  - FeedMore and Amherst closed congregare sites for Tuesday, but called clients and utilized Amherst and Red Cross services to get to clients in dire need.
- **NOTES FOR FUTURE:**
  - FeedMore being our largest provider but located in South Buffalo proved to be a detriment in both the Christmas Blizzard and November Storm. In both storms, their private plow wasn’t able to get to their lot and their location made it difficult for workers to get to them.
    - We will be including in our RFP for food this year a requirement for storm preparedness that does not rely on County / State resources to be able to operate.
  - Exploring options for longer-term food to be able to be kept in the home of those most vulnerable; as this storm lasted longer than anticipated + lack of people being able to have holiday meals, more were in need of food during the worst of the blizzard.

## II. TRANSPORTATION:

- **PREP:**
  - Worked with clients to get their dialysis appointments rescheduled for Friday, 12/23/2022. Two clients insisted that they had to go to dialysis on that day, so we left them as scheduled with our third-party transportation vendor.
    - I worked with Jason and Jonathan Shaw on potential driving of these clients, in case our third party vendor was unable to assist. EOC could not commit to transporting them, but was aware.
  - Deemed our transportation team non-essential because we had rescheduled rides, so as to have no onsite workers for Friday, 12/23/2022.
  
- **DURING:**
  - I made personal follow up calls to both still scheduled clients on Friday, 12/23: both rescheduled their dialysis for Saturday.
  - Dialysis transport, especially for our City providers and transportation providers whose shelters had been used as warming sites (ie. Cheektowaga), was still uncertain for Tuesday, 12/27 and Wednesday, 12/28 – it was nearly normal by Thursday.
  - Other transportation rides resumed by Thursday, 12/29.
  - Able to coordinate with EMS / Darien to get Senior Services wheelchair-capable van for dialysis transport from EOC.
  
- **NOTES FOR FUTURE:**
  - Will pre-emptively prepare to utilize Senior Services vans, if needed – reducing time in coordination during the storm. Schiller Park vans are stored at Harlem.

## III. CASE MANAGEMENT

- **PREP:**
  - Pre-emptively called all vulnerable clients to evaluate their preparedness.
  - Worked with EMS to get an extra oxygen tank to one client concerned they would run out during the storm; also with vendors to get food boxes out as needed.
  
- **DURING:**
  - On Friday, 12/23, our team completed calls that were not connected on Thursday and our phone line remained operational.
  - On Tuesday, 12/26 – Wednesday, 12/27, I created a Google Form and had entire staff perform well-checks for **all** City of Buffalo based clients. We also returned low priority SNOW line calls from older adults as well-checks.
  
- **NOTES FOR FUTURE:**
  - Would like to create and distribute shelf-stable food boxes for vulnerable clients, as noted above in Nutrition.
  - Will start earlier, our pre-storm checks began on Thursday, ideally if we had started 2 or 3 days ahead of the storm we could've spoken to more clients and done follow up on those that weren't able to be reached.

## IV. MISCELLANEOUS THOUGHTS

- **NSYOFA COORDINATION:**
  - I received an initial call from NYS on Saturday am, 12/24 saying that the Governor wished for the State employees to perform well-checks on older adults. I pushed back

strongly that well-checks were inappropriate at the time given the ongoing nature of the storm and our inability to do anything if older adults were unwell.

- After several phone calls with different people in the State Office for the Agency, I was able to connect them with the SNOW line.
  - This partnership resulted in 56 state employees cataloging 1500 SNOW line voicemails and then performing follow ups to those who left voicemails.
- Understanding the complexity of multiple governmental layers, assistance from State employees was invaluable.
- Future opportunities for partnership with other government should be explored, as additional staffing on the SNOW line was supremely helpful.
- **SNOW LINE:**
  - A list of **all** MCs needs to be created for additional staffing during times of emergency need.
    - This list could be trimmed based on the type of response, but if activating something such as the SNOW line, we need a more immediate all hands-on deck response.
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  - We should have a list of Spanish speaking or other language capable employees; numerous times I was using rudimentary Spanish to translate the SNOW line calls.
- Administration should establish what “essential” means in times of emergency: a more “all hands on deck” mentality, versus trying to stay in their own roles when those roles are not needed during the emergency. This is the thought behind the activation of the EOC, but I don’t think it’s clearly understood.
- All MC employees, at minimum, should have rechargeable chargers. They’re not expensive, if they don’t personally own them, could be purchased by us.
- I will be exploring with DISS how to establish a SNOW-like call-center for our 2 call-in lines. Longstanding Sr Services protocol forces Transportation to come in to dispatch rides and our NY Connects team to either check voicemails or come onsite in times of emergency in order to answer live calls.