

COUNTY OF SUFFOLK



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NYS Senate and Assembly Hearing 8/20/20 Power and Communication Failures from Tropical Storm Isaias

Good evening and thank you for inviting us here to testify today, even at this late hour. I'm Lisa Black, Chief Deputy County Executive for Suffolk County and I'm joined by John Jordan, Commissioner of Fire Rescue and Emergency Services. For situational awareness, Commissioner Jordan and I have been involved with far more crises and emergency situations than anyone should endure, including the current pandemic. I started my career in the NYS Senate then the Bloomberg Administration where I managed Communications at the City's Unified Operations Center during both Tropical Storm Irene and Hurricane Sandy. Later, at the NYS Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services I was involved with numerous weather events and emergencies including LIRR derailments, terrorist attempts and a bombing attack in NYC.

Commissioner Jordan is an accomplished emergency manager, a volunteer firefighter and former Chief of the North Babylon FD. He has been with the County since 2007 and similarly has led activations for both planned events such as the US Open and emergencies like hurricanes, wildfires, floods, blizzards, tornados, and even plane crashes.

You name it. Counties are in the business of emergency management, we conduct exercises, we create plans, and hold tabletops to assess and evaluate preparedness and possible scenarios, even testing ourselves with curveballs no one expected during drills to challenge how we pivot to changes in strategic planning. At every stage and in every event, communication is critical as it informs a coordinated emergency response.

Five days before Tropical Storm Isaias arrived, Suffolk County Emergency Management Personnel began to track the storms trajectory and triggered our 120-Hour Hurricane Activation Timeline.

During those days leading up to the storm, OEM participated in daily National Weather Service Briefings, and kept regular contact with our state partners -- all information gathered was shared with local towns and other stakeholders in preparation for the event.

As part of our coordinated response, the County Executive's office conducted a multi-agency coordination storm preparation call. This call is designed to organize the emergency response plan, survey County departments to solicit unmet needs, and activate pre-storm plans, including the deployment of critical resources.

Additionally, while our Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was already activated both in-person and virtually since early March for the ongoing pandemic, we extended the hours of operation and staffed the EOC with both internal and external agencies, including the Red Cross, LIRR, NYS DHSES, NYS Police and PSEG to encourage seamless communication.

Before the storm hit, we added communications staffing to our Countywide 311 call center, our FRES dispatch operation and our 911 section, and we closed our beaches to swimming and pre-staged resources.

Our main concern was the potential of trees and electrical wires coming down, which could lead to power outages. And that is exactly what happened.

As outages grew and residents experienced difficulty contacting PSEG, the utility asked us to outreach to customers from their Life Support Equipment (LSE) list. Within 24-hours of the storm, FRES first utilized our RAVE Program to send an electronic welfare call to applicable customers and reached more than 1,100 individuals in 15 minutes. Employees then called through more than 800 LSE customers to identify those in need of assistance. Finally, the SCPD performed physical welfare checks on over 200 customers, while PSEGLI outreached to County residents who reside outside our police district in the five eastern Towns.

Ultimately through this communication and outreach to critical care patients, we discovered that lists provided by PSEG were outdated and inaccurate. For example, County employees who made LSE calls reported that several individuals did not in fact have life support equipment or life-threatening conditions associated with a power outage. Unfortunately, they also found that many of the customers they called had deceased prior to the weather event. Moving forward, this is something that should be further evaluated as we prepare for future storms to ensure critical care patients remain a priority.

While power outages were a priority issue, customers across the County also experienced a number of issues with communication service. All major carriers reported cell tower outages and we continued to provide PSEG with updates on locations they should prioritize for restoration until power was fully restored on August 13th.

We are currently finalizing a countywide damage assessment which is expected to be in the tens of millions of dollars. COVID-19 has forced us to live in a new normal and adjust traditional plans. While ultimately the storm caused more damage than expected, and power restoration times lagged significantly, as with every storm, we will continue to evaluate our response and assess how we can improve for the next one. Because as Commissioner Jordan and I know full well, there will be a next one.

Once again, thank you for inviting us to speak tonight we are happy to answer any questions you may have.