

Clarkstown Supervisor George Hoehmann - Testimony

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. I am the Town Supervisor of Clarkstown, a town of just under 90,000 residents, but also the tenth largest town by population in NYS. We are home to the County seat in Rockland. This past storm we had over 100 roads closed and obstructed - some for four days or longer. During the tail end of the storm 29,000 of O&R's 32,000 customers in our town were out of power. That number dropped to 21,000 or roughly 66% of all customers by 11:00PM.

First, I'll talk about the good. After hurricane Sandy, O&R committed to providing staff within our Emergency Operation Center in the Police Department and followed through on that promise. This afforded us a direct, face to face communication of information between our police, Highway and O&R. This coordination assured a smooth and quick relay of the most up to date information of what was happening on the ground.

The bad, there were simply not enough crews in place quickly enough to address the damage especially in the early days of the recovery. Also there was poor communication with the general public that resulted in my office getting many calls repeatedly, to many to count, seeking information. Further, the outage map, which while much improved, was largely unreliable for the public over the course of the storm. So while communication with the town was good, the communication with the public was poor.

The response to those with special medical needs has to improve. We had dozens of residents with CPAP machines, recently out of surgery, nebulizers, and oxygen collectors who all needed help and could not get information or assistance. In fact, O&R's staff response to one specific resident was to go back to the hospital, many others were told to relocate. Medically impacted seniors and people with disabilities and pre-existing medical conditions often don't have the resources to relocate, especially during COVID. "Go elsewhere" is not an effective storm crisis response for these vulnerable residents.

So what can be done going forward?

First, I propose that a program be created and instituted that will allow residents the option to have a generator installed via a rebate or incentive program. This should also include transfer switches installed outside homes to allow for temporary plug in generators. The rebate program coupled with a stockpile of portable generators, either available via the utilities or directly to municipalities, we could actually help the people most in need. If these options could be paid for at reduced rates over time and added to the homeowners bill, those who are most vulnerable and cannot afford a generator could now have access to one.

Second, we need to identify and plan to improve infrastructure that is most affected and consistently goes down. In Clarkstown, this week O&R started a major storm hardening project costing \$2.5M, to bury transmission lines along the causeway that traverses Lake DeForest. This is something we have advocated for, for years. We have other areas that lose power frequently and for long periods of time that also need to be addressed.

Next week as part of our after action meeting with O&R we are going to highlight those areas and we are asking for a plan to harden these to prevent future outages. Ask any Supervisor or Mayor, they know the areas in their town most susceptible to storm damage. Let's address these both short term and develop longer term plans.

More efficient and better funded tree trimming, reinforced poles, and where appropriate burying of the lines in the most vulnerable areas are things that can and need to be done now.

Finally, we have had too many storms, this last one included, where site safety took days to arrive and we had to have police officers on overtime guarding downed wires and traffic lights at major intersections. I suggest an expansion of the site safety program, whereby municipalities and others can have individuals trained and prepared for deployment.

Thank you on behalf of the residents and businesses of the Town of Clarkstown for this opportunity to highlight both the inefficiencies of O&R's storm response and to offer useful suggestions to enhance our partnership for future storms.