

The Mayor Reports – Our City’s Response to Hurricane Sandy

Improving Emergency Preparedness and Homeland Security has always been a top priority for my Administration. Emergency Planning requires a discipline where our teams challenge each other to think through the worst case scenarios in order to be fully prepared for the unexpected.

Of course, with the creation of such a plan, you hope you will never have to implement it. There are times, however, when a circumstance presents itself as a considerable threat, and your plans must be rapidly deployed.

When that time comes, it is great to have the confidence in the experience of our Emergency Response Team that I have. This team had been “battle tested” by significant weather events in recent past, including a major Nor’easter in March 2010, a record total of 85” of snow during the winter of 2010-2011, a visit from Hurricane Irene last August, and last October’s surprise ice storm on Halloween.

Preparing for the Hurricane

With alerts from multiple government agencies, I convened a meeting on Friday, October 26th at Government Center with sixty city and community officials to perform a threat assessment on Hurricane Sandy. Our Emergency Preparedness Plan was about to be tested by a 1,000-mile wide hybrid storm with reports of 80-90 mph wind gusts. Fortunately, the forecast provided sufficient warning to align resources and evacuate people out of harm’s way.

We immediately activated our Emergency Operations Center (EOC). We closely monitored forecast models, paying attention to where the Hurricane was predicted to make landfall, and estimating the impact that a resulting storm surge would have on the Sound. Our primary point of concern would be Stamford’s shoreline, which had the potential to see coastal flooding unlike anything we have experienced before.

On Sunday, October 28th at 12:30pm, I formally declared a State of Emergency for the City, and a Mandatory Evacuation of key shoreline areas.

- **Army Corps of Engineers:** Our discussion started with our first line of defense, the Stamford Hurricane Barrier, constructed after the great flood of 1955 to prevent flooding on 600+ acres of Stamford's South End. When storms of this magnitude occur, the Army Corps of Engineers closes the barrier gate until the storm surge subsides, creating a 17 foot high wall to protect Stamford Harbor. The Corps shut the barrier gate on Saturday, and deployed an onsite team throughout the storm to monitor the situation and report in to our Emergency Operations Center. At the peak of the storm, the Corps reported the highest storm surge at 6 feet below the top of the Hurricane Barrier.

While the Hurricane Barrier was designed to protect the Harbor area and the South End of Stamford, we knew other coastal areas that could be vulnerable, such as Dolphin Cove, Shippan, Wallack’s Point, and the Cove that could experience major flooding. This prompted the Emergency Evacuation Order of SLOSH areas 1 & 2 (SLOSH refers to our city’s Sea, Lake, and Overland Surge from Hurricanes inundation

map, which is created with input from the Army Corps of Engineers and FEMA). Our projections indicated the potential for unprecedented tides at 4' to 8' above normal high tides.

- **Department of Health and Social Services:** With wide spread power outages and an evacuation order, many residents would need a place to relocate to while they waited for the storm to pass. Our Department of Health and Social Services coordinated with the Connecticut Red Cross to establish emergency shelters at Stamford High School, and Rippowam and Scofield Middle Schools, where we welcomed over 665 people during the height of the storm.
- **First Responders:** Our First Response teams, our Police Officers, Firefighters, and EMS Personnel, had a continual presence in our Emergency Operations Center from the start. They were deployed to enforce the State of Emergency order and facilitate the Emergency Evacuation. On Monday evening, conditions dramatically deteriorated, with winds exceeding 50 Miles per hour. Given the threat to our First Responders, the City temporarily suspended response and rescue operations. Once conditions improved, our teams were instantly redeployed.
- **Operations:** Our Operations Department supported all of the emergency plans with a 24/7 response, to maintain access for emergency vehicles and clearance of roads of fallen trees, power lines, and other storm debris. Based on experience from previous storms, we embedded our Operations staff with Connecticut Light & Power crews to assist with clearing the streets. Representatives from CL&P were also embedded within our EOC, providing City management with real-time updates throughout the storm. Our Operations teams were out immediately after the storm restoring order to our neighborhoods, and CL&P crews worked to restore power to 35,000+ customers in our community.
- **Stamford Public Schools:** Our Superintendent of Schools was involved in all EOC meetings and coordinated school closings and shelter plans with other agencies. At the height of the storm 8 of our 20 schools were without power, and many bus routes were impassable.
- **Citizen's Emergency Response Team (CERT):** The city relies on this volunteer civilian corps that can be deployed to augment city resources. Each member is trained and certified to perform a variety of functions during a state of emergency.
- **Stamford Amateur Radio Association (SARA):** These HAM radio operators volunteer their time to establish and maintain a communications network between Government Center and other agencies and organizations when mobile service is disrupted.

Constant Communication

Second only to our operational response was our focus on maintaining constant communication with the citizens of Stamford, to keep everyone safe and well informed throughout duration of the Hurricane.

A series of Public Alerts were issued, with updates the City received from the National Weather Service, The Connecticut Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, the Governor's Office, and others. The alerts also advised residents on storm preparation, shelter locations, local emergency contacts, and other relevant information.

Citizens who registered for our Code Red Emergency Notification System received alerts by phone. The City of Stamford website (www.cityofstamford.org), Twitter feeds, local television coverage, newspapers, online news outlets and blogs, and radio stations would play a key role in disseminating information. Through these outlets, the City would deliver a total of 15 Public Alerts before, during, and after the storm. The City of Stamford's Information Technology department played a crucial role in implementing communications, and our Citizen's Service bureau was manned 24/7 to provide a vital link between the needs of our residents and vital city services.

During the course of the weekend, there were conference calls with Governor Malloy and the leaders of other coastal towns and cities in the State, including a call with President Obama, to share situational reports and discuss available assets. Overall, after comparing notes with the other officials on the call, I knew our EOC had taken every possible precaution, and had every available asset in place - including the request and delivery of three high water vehicles from the National Guard.

Addressing the Aftermath

Despite all of the preparation, the most difficult task of any emergency is to witness the destruction it causes. I encountered significant damage and loss in Cove Island Park, Cummings Park, and in Shippan. While it was difficult to see our beaches and roads destroyed, and to comprehend that the damage to property was far worse than what we experienced with Hurricane Irene, we will rebuild and we will once again work with FEMA to obtain federal assistance.

Most importantly, there was no loss of life during Hurricane Sandy, and that's something we can all take great comfort in.

I found additional comfort in the countless actions of our community coming together. There were dozens of volunteer groups working tirelessly to support those displaced or disrupted by the storm. One such example was Backyard Humanitarian, a Red Cross community partner who provided exemplary support to our shelters by securing and coordinating additional manpower and resources among local businesses.

The Strength of Stamford

Emergency Preparedness plans are as reliable as the people who prepare the plans, the response is only as strong as the people who implement them, and the success is only achieved when the members of our community that rally and act in support of them.

When it comes to the unprecedented weather events we have experienced over the last few years, our Emergency Preparedness plans succeed because the members of our community have consistently come together to demonstrate that there is no storm stronger than the people of Stamford.

In Appreciation

We greatly acknowledge and thank the many diverse organizations who participated in Emergency Preparedness and Response in Stamford:

911 Communications Center
American Red Cross
Army Corps of Engineers
Belltown Fire Company
BOMA
Business Council of Fairfield County
Citizen's Emergency Response Team
Charter Oak Communities

City of Stamford
Board of Representatives
Board of Education
Building Department
Citizen's Service Center
Department of Operations
Emergency Operations Center
Engineering Department
Health & Social Services
Information Technology
Parks & Recreation
Department of Public Safety
All City Employees

Connecticut Light & Power
Glenbrook Fire Department
Harbor Commission
Harbor Master
Long Ridge Fire Company
Medical Reserve Corps
National Guard
The Salvation Army
Springdale Fire Company
Stamford Amateur Radio Association
Stamford Chamber of Commerce
Stamford EMS
Stamford Fire & Rescue Department
Stamford Police Department
Turn of River Fire Department
Water Pollution Control Authority