

Village of Scarsdale Fire Department



Presentation to Board of Trustees

After Action Report: Hurricane Sandy

Presented by Chief Thomas M. Cain

December 11, 2012

➤ **Welcome**

- Mayor Flisser, Fire Commissioner Eisenman, distinguished members of the Board of Trustees, Village Manager Gatta, and Deputy Manager Pappalardo, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you tonight.
- I've been asked to provide a very brief overview of Fire Department operations related to Hurricane Sandy.
- This will be a cursory summary because Village staff is preparing a comprehensive Village-wide after action report which will include detailed information from all applicable departments within the Village.

➤ **Preparation**

- Several days prior to the storm we began participating in daily conference calls with the Westchester County Office of Emergency Management and with Con Edison.
- All Fire Department vehicles were checked and fueled, fixed generators in the three fire stations and portable generators were checked and fueled, all portable pumps were checked and readied, and our inventory of caution tape and flares was well stocked.
- We reviewed our written operational plan for severe weather events, and the day prior to the storm I implemented a tiered staffing plan which I have developed and refined over the past seven years as we deal with seemingly one historic storm after another. The goal is to ensure adequate staffing in order to be able to continue to provide fire protection for the Village and to deliver the services for which we are relied upon, without spending a single extra dollar of taxpayer money beyond what is absolutely necessary.
- In the case of this particular storm, I ordered the largest possible staffing increase, to begin at 7am on the morning of October 29. We basically doubled the staffing for the first 36 hours.

➤ **Storm**

- The height of the storm came at mid-afternoon on October 29 and we were inundated with emergency responses by early evening.
- We activated our volunteer firefighter storm squad as soon as the incident volume began to outpace available resources, and we received an immediate and robust turnout of 14 volunteer firefighters. These volunteers left their own families and homes in jeopardy to respond to our call, and they were out during the height of the storm at great personal risk to themselves. They stayed with us until the incident volume began to slow just a bit, and not one of our volunteers requested to be let go early. They are to be commended for their actions and their selflessness.
- In the first 24 hours of the storm the Fire Department responded to 211 emergency incidents. Note that in a typical 24 hour period we respond to 3.61 emergency calls, so the incident volume was 59 times greater than usual. Another way to look at this: Our firefighters performed 59 days worth of work in 1 day.
- Overall, during the 12 day period that the Village state of emergency was in effect the Fire Department responded to 403 emergency incidents. During a typical 12 day period we respond to 43.3 incidents, so this means our workload was 10 times greater than normal during this period.
- We responded to wires down, trees down on houses, trees down on cars, generator fires, automobile accidents, gas leaks, carbon monoxide problems, electrical problems, three relatively minor structure fires and other miscellaneous calls during this period.
- The Village's new Emergency Operations Center (or EOC) in the Public Safety Building was opened on the afternoon of October 29, and for the next 12 days at least one Fire Department representative was in the EOC every moment it was open. We knew that the Village needed a state of the art EOC when we designed the Public Safety Building, and having an adequate facility where key representatives from Village staff could work

together to manage a major weather event proved its value the very first time we used it.

- Our career firefighters performed very admirably throughout this event, but especially during the height of the storm. I myself was driving through the Village throughout the entire night and can tell you firsthand how dangerous it was to be out. Our firefighters never blinked, and responded to every single request for help that we received. Every firefighter reported for work as scheduled before, during and after the storm, even though it meant leaving their homes and families at risk. No one missed a shift in the first 3 days, many of them worked 36 or more consecutive hours, and not a single firefighter was late for duty, which is especially remarkable given the driving conditions the first several days.
- One firefighter slipped on wet leaves and fell while checking a house hit by a tree late on the night of October 29. He was injured and eventually required minor surgery to repair the injury. However, he continued working straight through until 5pm on October 30, and didn't even report the injury until his shift was over. This is the kind of dedication I have come to expect from our public servants in the Village of Scarsdale.
- As has been widely reported, the Lightpath system that provides phone, internet and email service for the entire Village government went down early on in the storm when both our primary and secondary fiber optic lines were taken down by falling trees.
- For the Fire Department, there was good news and bad related to phones. Our official emergency line is answered by the Westchester County 60 Control dispatch center in Valhalla and was therefore unaffected by the outage. However, our official business line and the internal phones in all three fire stations and between the stations all went down.
- Callers to our business line received no answer. Although the three Public Safety 9-1-1 lines which are answered at the Police desk remained operational because they are provided by Verizon

rather than Lightpath, we were forced to use a volunteer firefighter to serve as a runner between the Police desk and the Fire desk so we could be made aware of 9-1-1 calls requiring a Fire Department response.

- Our Village-wide two way radio system remained completely operational throughout the event. Although our primary system went down briefly, our secondary radio transmission system, which broadcasts from the monopole at the new Public Safety Building, operated flawlessly and allowed us to maintain regular radio communications between the fire stations and the crews in the field. This also meant that we never for one second lost communication with our dispatch center, 60 Control.
- Station 1 lost power early on but the generator came on automatically and provided continuous power for eight days. Station 3 and the Public Safety Building both have generators, but fortunately never lost power.
- Losing our business line and our Village email system proved to be enormously difficult for the eight days we were out, and we are already hard at work making sure this doesn't happen again. The Fire Department had previously ordered two old fashioned copper phone lines from Verizon several months before the storm. We have now increased the order to three copper lines, and these lines can be used to substitute for Lightpath numbers in the event this happens again. In addition, the Village is looking at ways to build in some redundancy for our email and internet systems.

➤ **Aftermath**

- In the days following the storm as we all experienced the frustrating wait for Con Ed to restore power, the Fire Department worked hard to ensure the safety of the residents we serve.
- Our volunteer firefighters participated in joint welfare checks with the Police Department in which they went door to door to check

on the safety of people living on streets which were inaccessible for several days due to fallen trees.

- We issued a press release on generator and candle safety because of the widespread and prolonged power outage. This information was included in some of the daily robo calls made by the Village and was sent to every local media outlet, where they helped us to get the word out. As a matter of fact, because we had no internet or email service our fire inspector took a laptop to SVAC's headquarters where he used their wifi network and his personal email address to send out the press release.
- Beginning on day three and everyday thereafter our firefighters were out driving through every neighborhood conducting generator checks. They looked for temporary or portable generators and educated residents on proper usage and general safety tips. They also distributed the above-mentioned press release.
- We dealt with significant response issues for the first several days because of the road closures caused by downed trees and wires. However, the supplemental staffing and a temporarily modified resource allocation system bisected by our major east/west roadways helped to mitigate this issue and reduce response times.
- Moving forward, we will carefully review this entire event to see where the Fire Department can improve and what lessons can be taken from this storm. We are open to making any change which will improve our operations, as we understand that major weather events such as October's storm are unfortunately becoming the norm.

➤ **Praise**

- In closing, I would be remiss if I didn't offer some words of praise, because overall this was a successfully managed event in which all requests for service were answered and in which there were no serious injuries or deaths suffered by our residents.
- I've already touched on the efforts of our career and volunteer firefighters, and their actions speak for themselves.
- However, I hope our residents also realize how incredibly hard the staffs from the Department of Public Works, the Police Department, the Scarsdale Volunteer Ambulance Corp, the Building and Engineering Departments, and the Manager's office all worked before, during and after this event. These folks are to be commended for restoring the Village to normalcy so quickly, as are the staff from the Village Hall who worked without power, phones or email for a week and never stopped communicating with the residents and responding to innumerable complaints and concerns.
- Overall, the Village should be very proud of the efforts of everyone involved with the response to this unprecedented storm. I know for a fact that I was very proud of the Fire Department, and all the other departments for that matter. I think it's clear that the residents of Scarsdale are very fortunate to be served by a team of such competent professionals who jointly displayed an incredible dedication to their duties and to this Village.
- Thank you.