

September 1st Storm And COVID-19 Biggest Challenges For County In 2021

The most significant challenge Hunterdon County faced in 2021, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic response, was when the remnants of Hurricane Ida turned deadly as it hit the area on September 1st, testing the county's emergency response network, washing out numerous roads and bridges, and creating a massive cleanup effort in many communities.

A Deadly Storm Worse Than Sandy

Six individuals died as a result of the Hurricane Ida storm that not only brought flooding to river towns and other areas along various county waterways, but also brought an unprecedented water surge in areas that had never before seen flooding.

Public Safety and Office of Emergency Management Director Brayden Fahey called the storm, "Worse than what the county experienced from super storm Sandy in 2012. It was more deadly, caused more damage, and greatly challenged first responders because of its intensity."

First Responders Rose To The Challenge

The County's 9-1-1 Center received over 2400 calls during the 12-hour period of the storm, directing local first responders to brave the storm and flood waters to rescue those stuck in the flood countless times.

The County's emergency response forces made over 300 water rescues, with swift water rescue mutual aid being provided by Burlington County first responders and New Jersey Task Force 1, the State's Urban Search Rescue Team. Helicopter resources from the State Police, National Guard, and Coast Guard were used to aid search and rescue.

The Hunterdon County Office of Emergency Management also processed more than 40 resource requests from municipal government to support their response to the storm.

Storm Victims Mourned

Reporting on the emergency response at the Commissioners Board meeting on September 7th, Deputy Director and Public Safety liaison John E. Lanza captured the incredulity and horror of the storm when he stated, "While there is no good way to leave this life, for someone to be simply driving home from work, only to be swept away by a flash flood, the loss to the families of the victims is unimaginably tragic."

Recovery and Clean Up The Top Priority

The clean-up and recovery have been a mammoth operation. Under the County's state of emergency declaration, Board of Commissioners Director Sue Soloway provided leadership for county forces in the first days following the storm, which included meeting with Governor Phil Murphy, along with Commissioner Shaun Van Doren to observe storm damage in Lambertville, in order to gain state support for the clean-up.

Soloway, Van Doren, and Lanza were able to conduct firsthand observations of storm damage in numerous communities around the county.

Soloway stated, "I wish to be very clear that helping Hunterdon County residents and businesses recover and rebuild is the single most important priority for the County government at this time," when the Commissioner Board directed all county departments and divisions to take immediate steps to aid in the initial recovery.

Storm Cleanup: All Hands On Deck

Numerous communities in the county faced the arduous task of clearing blocked streets, disposal of massive amounts of storm damaged personal property, and cleaning out flood damaged homes. Hunterdon County's government brought in a major clean up contractor, Ashbritt, to aid the towns.

The County's Buildings and Maintenance staff was tasked with debris cleanup and facilities inspection for all county buildings and the Lansdown and Columbia trail. The crews transported supplies for the flood victims in the many hard-hit areas in the southern part of the county, including delivering pallets of water and forty wheelbarrows for flood victims use.

Public Works In Overdrive To Get Roads and Bridges Open

The County's Department of Public Works' crews over the course of the last three months have removed heavy debris from over 72 bridges and culverts and 19 different county roads and repaired over 44 different county roads and structures that suffered erosion damage.

The Department reports that after the storm there were 19 bridges or culvert that were impassable to vehicles of which currently only six remain impassable. And the Engineering Department has put out 5 emergency repair jobs for contractors to bid on. These jobs include repairs to 4 bridges and 3 county roadways.

Monmouth County's Public Works Department provided mutual aid in the form of sending three street sweepers to Hunterdon County municipalities in need of street cleaning.

Hunterdon County Proved Its Resilience In Meeting The Challenge

Director Soloway said in September and it remains true today, “There is still much to be done to recover, but the county’s workforce, and our people, have proven that we are up to the challenge.”