



**Testimony of Bart Russell, Executive Director
Connecticut Council of Small Towns
Before the Labor, Public Safety, Planning & Development
and Energy & Technology Committees
September 26, 2011**

RE: TROPICAL STORM IRENE RESPONSE EFFORTS

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on behalf of the Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST) relative to Tropical Storm Irene preparation and response efforts.

Many mayors and first selectman have expressed frustration and disappointment with the response efforts to Tropical Storm Irene. At the same time, some towns have indicated that their experiences were quite positive. COST recognizes that the state's electric, telecommunications and cable utilities were faced with the enormous challenge of responding to an unprecedented number of power outages across the state. To assist in providing a framework for improving response efforts in the future, COST would like to share the experiences of our member towns with lawmakers and public officials.

Utility Response Efforts

Many of our member towns indicated that they understood that priority had to be given to restoring power to critical areas, such as densely populated areas, major intersections, hospitals, nursing homes and schools. However, after several days had gone by with little communication from utilities, many small towns still had a significant percentage of homes and businesses experiencing power outages. Some were unable to communicate with energy utilities even where downed power lines posed a direct danger to residents or made access roads impassable, jeopardizing the ability of residents to obtain food, water or health care. In some small towns, there may be very few access roads and these roads need to be cleared as soon as possible to protect the health and safety of residents, particularly if there are evacuation orders.

Management of Work Crews

Town leaders across the state have applauded the efforts of linesman and other utility crew members who worked tirelessly to help restore power, telephone and cable lines. However, there have been several comments questioning whether linesman and other restoration personnel, particularly out-of-state work crews, were managed appropriately so that they could be dispatched to sites more quickly and advised on how to begin or assist in restoration efforts. Several town leaders and residents have shared their experience in discovering that work crews

were sitting idle waiting for direction from supervisors. Others expressed frustration that local public works departments could not clear downed wires from roads because they had no idea when utility work crews would be available to ground wires. In towns that were able to communicate effectively with CL&P, town leaders reported positive experiences in requesting utility crews to be dispatched to ground downed wires to enable the town public works department to cut through trees and make roads accessible more quickly.

Communication with Utility Officials

During a response effort of this magnitude, clear channels of communication are vital. Town officials who were unable to communicate with key utility personnel efforts were deeply frustrated because they were unable to obtain detailed information on restoration efforts to communicate to residents and businesses. Town leaders in these areas were also unable to coordinate restoration efforts to ensure that critical intersections and roadways were cleared and that service was restored to key areas and sensitive populations, such as elderly housing complexes and nursing homes. For example, in the Willimantic Service District it took:

- 2 days to get the EOC, Police, Fire, Shelter, and 80 elderly housing units back on with power one block away and no obstructions due to a blown breaker;
- 4 days to open roadways with single access meaning that the town could not provide emergency services and the citizens get their cars out to get food and water;
- 5 days to pull leaking transformers out of wetlands;
- 6 days to get 2 sewer pump stations and 52 household grinder pumps service requiring town crews to trailer generators to draw down the sewage levels to prevent back-ups into homes; and,
- 8 days for full restoration.

Several towns did acknowledge, however, how helpful CL&P's municipal liaisons and coordinators were in improving communication but some noted that even the liaisons were unable to get in contact with utility personnel to obtain information on the timing of restoration efforts or to communicate information from town officials to better coordinate efforts. In those towns where clear channels of communication were maintained, town leaders could coordinate with utility crews to expedite restoration efforts and clear roadways.

Outage Maps

Many town leaders and residents were frustrated with the information they were able to obtain from the utility's website, particularly the outage maps, because the information conflicted with what they were told by work crews or by customer service representatives or what was reported on the news.

CT Alert Emergency Messaging

Several towns noted that the state's CT Alert emergency messaging service was very effective in communicating to residents and businesses regarding evacuation orders, town services, clean-up information, etc. The state and towns should continue to encourage residents to sign-up for such alerts, particularly text messaging which was available when voice calling was unavailable.

COST and its member towns stand ready to work with lawmakers and public officials to develop a plan that will ensure that town leaders are able to coordinate restoration efforts more

Connecticut Council of Small Towns

1245 Farmington Avenue, Suite 101

West Hartford, CT 06107

860-676-0770

860-676-2662 Fax

effectively to ensure that service is restored more quickly to critical service areas and vulnerable populations and that roads and intersections are cleared safely and swiftly. Based on the preliminary input of our small towns, COST recommends the development of an emergency response plan that includes:

- 1) A comprehensive communications outreach plan to improve coordination of restoration efforts with town officials, including the dispatching of crews to ground downed wires;
- 2) Emergency contact information to ensure that town officials can get in contact with utilities to dispatch crews to immediately respond to dangerous or life threatening situations;
- 3) A centralized contact point for town officials to communicate with utility officials to better coordinate efforts between utility work crews and public works departments;
- 4) Identification of critical public safety service areas, such as fire or police stations as priority areas for restoration efforts, even if they are not in densely populated areas;
- 5) Identification of areas that serve vulnerable populations, such as elderly housing, as priority areas in restoration efforts, even if they are not in densely populated areas;
- 6) Identification of key access roads in small towns that are vital to obtain food, water and health care services or to evacuate residents;
- 7) Coordination with Regional Planning Organizations and emergency management officials; and,
- 8) Methods for employing sufficient staffing levels in the event of widespread outages, including customer service representatives and work crews.

In addition, we support the thoughtful recommendations prepared by the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials and suggest that these be incorporated in any plan to improve state, local and utility company response to weather related emergencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important issue.