

# **CITY OF BUFFALO, NY**

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## **DISASTER MANAGEMENT PLAN: SEVERE WINTER STORM**



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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**PREFACE..... 3**

**SIGNATURE PAGE..... 4**

**BASE PLAN ..... 5**

    MISSION ..... 5

    STATEMENT OF PURPOSE..... 5

    AUTHORITIES ..... 5

    COMMUNICATION PLAN..... 6

    MUTUAL AID AGREEMENT ..... 7

**CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS ..... 8**

    COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT ..... 8

    RESOURCE AVAILABILITY AND DISTRIBUTION..... 9

    DISASTER RESPONSE EVALUATION ..... 10

**ANNEX 1: THREAT AND HAZARDS ASSESSMENT TABLE FOR ERIE COUNTY  
DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY & EMERGENCY SERVICES, NEW  
YORK (U.S.)..... 12**

**ANNEX 2: INCIDENT COMMAND SYSTEM FOR SEVERE WINTER STORM IN  
BUFFALO, NY ..... 14**

**ANNEX 3: COMMUNITY TRAINING FOR SEVERE WINTER STORM IN BUFFALO,  
NY..... 15**

**REFERENCES..... 16**

## PREFACE

Buffalo, New York (NY) is located in the western region of NY State, roughly six hours by car (292 miles) from Manhattan. With a population of approximately 280,000 individuals, it is one of the most populated cities in in upstate NY.<sup>1</sup> Due its proximity to Lake Erie, Buffalo and other nearby cities in this region may experience severe winter weather. This may include substantial snowfall, below zero temperatures, and icy roads. During the winter, a phenomenon, referred to as the “lake-effect” might occur; which happens when cold air originating in Canada crosses over warm lake waters, creating dense clouds which eventually develop into heavy snow bands downwind. Northern parts of Buffalo receive much less lake-effect snow than southern Buffalo due to the direction of prevailing winds.<sup>2</sup>

In the event of a Buffalo Blizzard, this Disaster Plan will establish the roles and responsibilities each respected party must take in Erie County. It is understood that each winter storm is different and will present a unique set of challenges. This plan is intended to be improved upon as users may see elements that need updating.

**SIGNATURE PAGE**

I have reviewed and support the implementation of the Disaster Management Plan for Severe Winter Storms in Buffalo, NY:

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Byron W. Brown  
*Mayor of the City of Buffalo*

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DATE

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Daniel J. Neaverth Jr  
*Commissioner of the Erie County Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Services*

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DATE

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Gregory J. Butcher  
*Deputy Commissioner of the Erie County Division of Disaster Preparedness / Homeland Security*

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DATE

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Gale R. Burstein  
*Commissioner of the Erie County Department of Health*

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DATE

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James V. McDonald  
*Commissioner of the New York State Department of Health*

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DATE

## **BASE PLAN**

### **MISSION**

The Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services' mission statement emphasizes the crucial part it plays in ensuring the safety and adaptability of the community it serves. The division pledges a thorough approach to disaster management by offering leadership, coordination, and support. The focus includes prevention, protection, preparedness, reaction, recovery, and mitigation across the entire spectrum of disaster and emergency response. This commitment demonstrates commitment to ensuring public safety, improving disaster preparedness, and lessening the effects of emergencies on both an individual and community level. In order to build a safer and more resilient environment for everybody, the department highlights the significance of preventative measures, effective responses, and sustained recovery activities.

### **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

The purpose of this plan is to provide officials with necessary information that may be needed to take appropriate action if a blizzard hits Buffalo, New York. This plan will include a list of recommendations that should be taken if a blizzard were to occur (or is forecasted).

### **AUTHORITIES**

The Erie County Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Services is accredited by the New York State Emergency Management Association (NYSEMA), according to standards outlined by relevant State laws and gold standard practices in emergency management.<sup>3</sup> In the event of a natural or man-made disaster, State Law determines that the authority to respond to and manage such an incident lies with the local government and emergency services, with ancillary assistance from the State being provided when necessary<sup>4</sup>:

*“It shall be the policy of the state that: (a) local government and emergency service organizations continue their essential role as the first line of defense in times of disaster, and that the state provide appropriate supportive services to the extent necessary”*

- NYS Executive Law Article 2-B Section 20

Furthermore, the legal power with respect to the formation and implementation of disaster preparedness programs, in addition to the efficient and successful enactment of such programs in the event of a disaster, lies with the chief executive of the locality. In the case of the City of Buffalo, this responsibility falls within the duties of the Mayor<sup>4</sup>:

*“... local chief executives take an active and personal role in the development and implementation of disaster preparedness programs and be vested with authority and responsibility in order to insure the success of such programs”*

- NYS Executive Law Article 2-B Section 20

## **COMMUNICATION PLAN**

### **Internal Communication**

Intra-agency communication will be coordinated by the Deputy Commissioner:

*Gregory J. Butcher*

Likewise, the Deputy Commissioner may task the dispatching of information within the Disaster Preparedness / Homeland security division to the Emergency Services Coordinator:

*Darien Pratchett*

In situations where the disruption of telephonic or electronic communication lines prevents the establishment of contact within the division, the Medical Emergency Radio System (MERS) dispatch unit shall be contacted and serve as a central point for communication:

*MERS 24-Hour Dispatch*

*716-898-3696*

## **External Communication**

Interagency communication is coordinated through the Communications Unit (COML) of the Emergency Preparedness / Disaster Response branch of the Erie County Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Services. COML oversees the overall installation, maintenance, and repair of both mobile and base radio systems that comprise 400MHz two-radio communications. These communication systems, in addition to mobile phones, ensure coordination and reliable sharing of information between emergency medical services, the fire department, law enforcement agencies, and other institutions responsible for public safety.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, alerts and pertinent information needed to be relayed to the public shall be broadcast via social media (City of Buffalo 'X' account), emergency text notification service, local newspapers, cable television, and local radio stations. County officials shall ensure that appropriate and timely messaging is disseminated to the public on multiple platforms outlined above in circumstances where advanced warning regarding a possible threat is available.

### **MUTUAL AID AGREEMENT**

- The American Red Cross
- Buffalo Fire Department
- Buffalo Police Department
- New York State Office of Emergency Management (NYSDHSES)
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
- Buffalo Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

## CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

### COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A thorough community risk assessment (RA) can help us to determine what resources are necessary to conduct life-saving and life- sustaining operations during the emergency response phase of a disaster. Depending on the magnitude of the event, an RA can be conducted by local officials, specially trained State teams, or joint Federal/State Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) disaster assessment teams. To effectively respond to a disaster, such as a severe winter storm, the city and/or State needs to have a system in place that can quickly indicate the level of response that is required and, to the extent possible, based on forecasting, pre-position the resources where they will be needed. If the situation warrants escalation, then the State will notify the FEMA Regional Director that Federal assistance may be needed, and the State must answer questions on immediate life, safety, and health needs. Information to answer the questions is gathered by State RA Teams that are: pre-designated, trained, and equipped with “go-kits” that include communications, computers, forms, and cameras. Response Teams receive important information from these rapid, targeted assessments. Information may include on-the ground assessment of conditions, weather forecast information, fly-overs, satellite imagery, television coverage, reports from local emergency managers in the locally impacted area, computer modeling, or a combination of methods. The point is that it is quick. The goal of the RA is to determine the scope of disaster: How bad is it? What areas are affected? How many people are affected? What are the risks to life, safety, and health? What is the status of emergency services (Fire, police, EMS)?<sup>8</sup>

A thorough assessment is essential in ensuring the safety and well-being of the impacted community and especially the most vulnerable groups in the time period during and immediately following a severe winter storm in Buffalo. Local emergency managers should be aware of the people in their communities with special access and functional needs, such as those requiring the use of powered life support equipment. Many cities maintain and constantly update this information. As part of the assessment, important issues as noted above need to be immediately addressed. For example, ensuring that unhoused individuals or those with inadequate housing are



relocated to suitable shelter is a high priority, as is the relocation of dialysis patients who may not be able to get to their treatment center in the aftermath of a severe snowstorm, women nearing term for delivery, etc. All of the most vulnerable members of the community need to be identified and relocated to safe places (including, in some cases, to local hospitals). During periods of extreme cold, warming centers, temporary shelters, and other suitable respite sites need to be pre-arranged. Warm clothing, hats, coats, boots, gloves etc., can be distributed at warming centers and shelters for those in need.

During severe winter storms, it is vitally important to keep roads clear for emergency personnel. Every effort must be made to keep public transportation operating and roads clear to reduce hazardous rescues in the midst of the storm. In order to successfully deliver help and support those in need, it is also important to ensure that clear and timely communication channels are established in order to distribute weather-related information and emergency alerts. Additionally, an evaluation of community support networks and resources, as well as their accessibility, must be conducted. This comprehensive evaluation is vital for developing and putting into action various plans that ensure the community's safety, health, and resilience during severe weather occurrences.

## **RESOURCE AVAILABILITY AND DISTRIBUTION**

In the case of a severe winter storm affecting Buffalo, this plan will be activated and local response teams will take action to ensure an effective community response. Vulnerable populations such as those who are homeless, have limited access to transportation, seniors, children, pregnant people, disabled, or have any access and functional need that increases their risk and/or impedes their ability to shelter in place or shelter in a community emergency center will be a priority for both preparedness and response to severe winter weather.

Buffalo has a large population of unhoused individuals; under extreme winter weather conditions, exposure to the elements may be deadly. With wind chills and temperatures below zero degrees Fahrenheit, those who do not have shelter will be a priority to transfer to local warming centers. Local churches, government buildings, and schools may be suitable as

additional shelter spaces for those who are homeless or who have become stranded due to weather conditions. For those who have access to a cellular device, they can call 211 to locate a warming shelter.

Traveling during a blizzard is strongly discouraged, but individuals may find themselves in situations where they become trapped. For vehicles that are stuck in the snow or unable to progress due to poor visibility conditions, the Buffalo Police and Fire Department and 911 are resources that may be immediately contacted in order to provide assistance. When severe snowfall is predicted, the emergency response agencies will be on high alert.

Seniors, those who are disabled and/or with severe medical conditions (including those who require electricity for their durable medical equipment) may have trouble accessing food, water, and other essential services during a blizzard. It is suggested that all community members have at least 7 days' worth of food and water in case of an emergency. Red Cross provides excellent guidance on preparing for winter weather.<sup>9</sup> It is important for emergency management to reach out and notify these populations before a blizzard hits so that they can plan ahead for resources they may need. The Erie County Department of Health (ECDOH) can assist with transportation for vulnerable individuals who may need to be relocated to a warming center or shelter before a blizzard.

## **DISASTER RESPONSE EVALUATION**

The success of disaster response in mitigating the loss of life, injury, and infrastructure damage during a winter storm is greatly dependent on the adoption of the modern-day disaster paradigm: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. Additionally, following the recovery phase, a period of reflection (culminating in an after-action report) is also essential for continuous quality improvement. Embedding an effectiveness evaluation of the disaster response, and conducting concurrent assessment, will result in flexible adaptations to the response. The prompt development of an After-Action Assessment and Report delineating the successes and weaknesses of the response is vital in improving the response to future emergencies and disasters.<sup>10</sup>

Evaluation criteria for measuring the effectiveness of the disaster response in the case of a severe winter storm in Buffalo have been identified as follows:

- Dissemination of information and emergency alerts to all communities, particularly vulnerable populations, through vast and diverse communication platforms: social media, text message, radio, television, and electronic sign boards
- Timely propagation of warning messages and alerts to all communities, particularly vulnerable populations, with an adequate time frame for preparation and obtaining of provisions
- Assessment of the effectiveness and utilization of intra- and inter-agency radio communication systems
- Evaluation of the appropriateness of road closures in response to severe weather warnings
- Time taken from receipt of alerts regarding winter storms to the establishment of warming centers
- Identification (with MOUs in place) and location of warming centers, specifically distinguishing those that have been made accessible to disabled and other vulnerable and unhoused populations
- Measurement of the effectiveness of warming centers, including equipment and resource availability, such as food, blankets and emergency generators. Sign language interpreters, as needed, should be pre-identified and pre-located

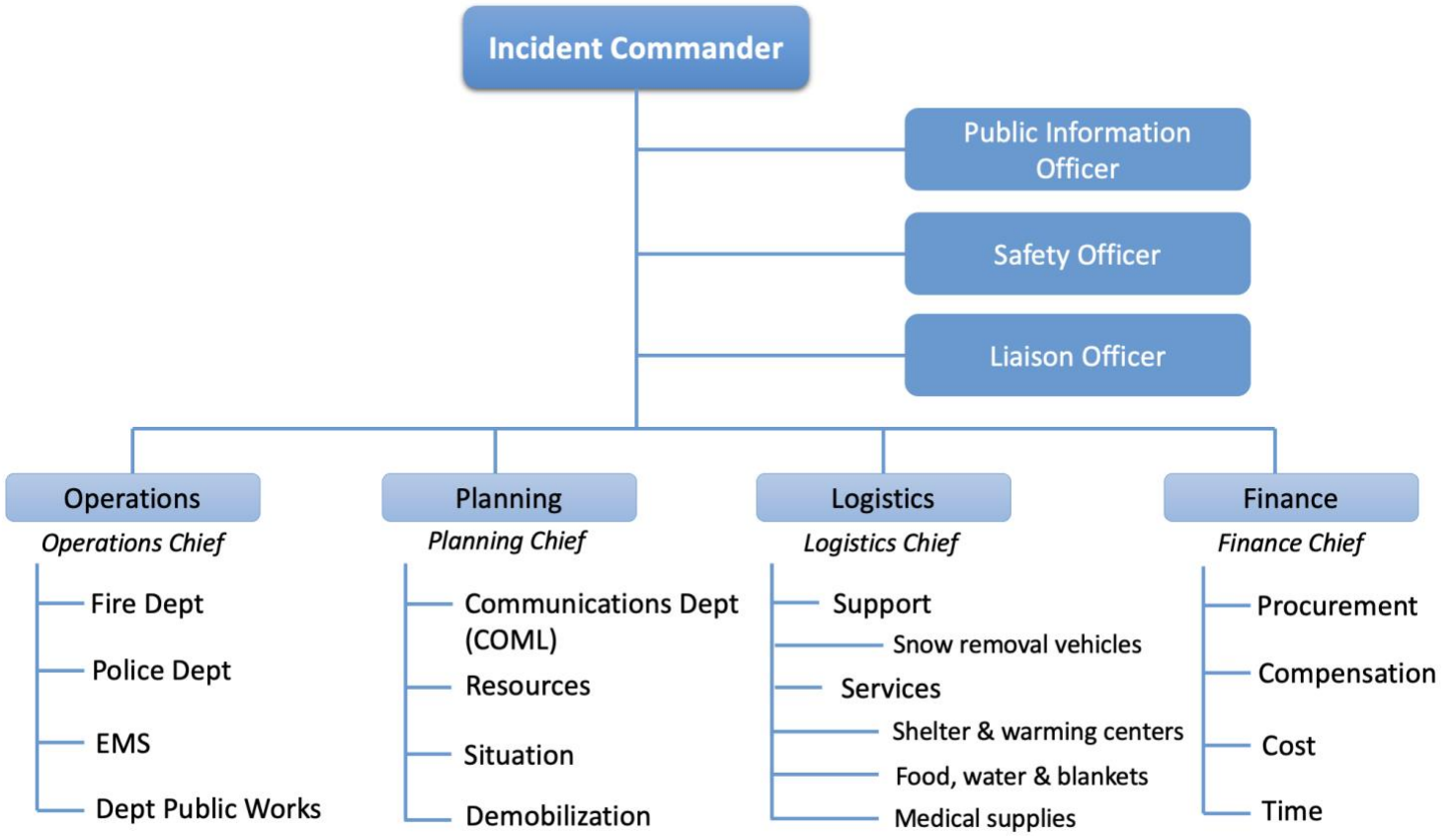
In addition to the inclusion of the above-mentioned criteria, an after-action report necessitates the evaluation of the effective coverage of information to the public, with a clear understanding of how many individuals and families received emergency alerts within a suitable time-frame, as well as an assessment of the effectiveness and reach of public resources such as blankets, food, and warming centers. Likewise, taking note of the challenges and weaknesses of the response in the aftermath of the disaster creates an opportunity to devise pragmatic solutions with the aim of improving disaster plans for subsequent winter storms, and is similarly a vital component of the after-action report.

**Annex 1: Threat and Hazards Assessment Table for Erie County Department of Homeland Security & Emergency Services, New York (U.S.)<sup>11,12</sup>**

<b>Natural</b>	<b>Technological</b>	<b>Human-caused</b>
Resulting from acts of nature	Involves accidents or the failures of systems and structures	Caused by the intentional actions of an adversary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Severe winter storms: Upstate New York is no stranger to winter storms. However, climate change has exacerbated the severity of blizzards and snowfall resulting in a need to increase capability for the management of such disasters. The deadly blizzard of December 2022 affecting Erie County, consisting of hurricane-strength winds, dangerous whiteout conditions and temperatures reaching 30°F below freezing, resulted in 46 deaths and significant disruption of necessary infrastructure such as heat and power. Systemic racism and structural deficiencies led to disproportionate devastation for poor and marginalized residents.</li> <li>• Flooding: As global temperatures rise and extreme weather patterns are being experienced all over the world, the risk of flooding in Erie</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brownfield sites: Due to the rich industrial history of the region, as well as significant nuclear activities, several brownfield sites pose an environmental risk to human health due to prevalent industrial waste that renders the land unusable. Buffalo and surrounding areas of Erie County are reported to lie in the 80<sup>th</sup>-100<sup>th</sup> percentiles nationally with regards to hazardous waste proximity. Three studies, including the East Buffalo-West Cheektowaga study, have identified elevated incidents of cancer in areas associated with high rates of chemical contaminants.</li> <li>• Inadequate emergency response and socioeconomic inequities: During the December 2022 blizzard, emergency rescue and recovery efforts were thwarted due to insufficient resource</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active shooter incidents / mass shootings: The Tops Massacre, which occurred in a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Buffalo on May 14<sup>th</sup> 2022, killing 10 people and injuring 3, is a devastating example of the increasing number of racially-motivated mass shootings in the U.S.</li> <li>• Homegrown Violent Extremists: The top terrorism threat in New York State is a result of Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs). HVEs are recruited by foreign terrorist entities, Al Qa’ida and the Islamic State, with the September 2106</li> </ul>

<p>County following record snowfall, due to snowmelt as temperatures rise, is an increasing natural disaster threat to the area. Planning and preparation need to include consideration of flooding risk ensuing severe winter storms.</p>	<p>allocation to underserved communities, and deficient emergency preparedness coordination. Some of the challenges faced included widespread power outages, long-standing inequities in housing quality, and the inability of individuals living in lower-income neighborhoods to shelter-in-place with adequate food and medication. Resources for prompt and efficient snow removal and the provision of warming shelters within neighborhoods and districts are examples of the improvements necessary to mitigate the casualties resulting from aging infrastructure and inequitably distributed resources.</p>	<p>bombings in New York City and New Jersey outlining the most recent threat within the state of New York. Of those arrested in relation to Islamic State-associated attacks between March 2014 – August 2016, the largest number of arrests were made in New York State.</p>
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**Annex 2: Incident Command System for Severe Winter Storm in Buffalo, NY**



**Annex 3: Community Training for Severe Winter Storm in  
Buffalo, NY**

<b>Objectives of Community Training</b>	The primary goal is to equip community members with the knowledge and skills necessary to prepare for and mitigate the impact of severe winter storms. This includes advocating for preparedness measures such as safe housing, understanding warning systems, creating emergency plans, and engaging in community-based support during emergencies.
<b>Estimated Length of Training</b>	A half-day seminar (3-4 hours), which will incorporate hands-on demonstrations.
<b>Target Audience and Max Size of Audience</b>	50-100 participants. Seminar will be interactive so the size allows for participants to have effective engagement and personalized attention.
<b>What Do You Want Community Members to Do as a Result of Their Attending this Session?</b>	The emphasis would be on creating a comprehensive training seminar that not only informs, but also engages, the community. By involving local authorities, weather experts, and community leaders, the seminar aims to build a stronger, more resilient community better equipped to face severe winter storms.
<b>Strategies to Increase Community Uptake of Your Mitigation</b>	<p>Comprehending Storms in Buffalo</p> <p>Characteristics of severe winter storms in Buffalo (when are they most likely to happen, etc.)</p> <p>Impact on infrastructure, transportation, and daily life</p> <p>Key risks associated with severe winter weather</p> <p>Preparedness and Mitigation Measures</p> <p>Creating a family emergency plan</p> <p>Winterizing homes and vehicles</p> <p>Importance of emergency kits (including food, water, medical supplies, etc.)</p> <p>Safe heating practices and fire prevention</p> <p>Identifying and accessing community emergency resources</p> <p>Effective Communication and Warning Systems</p> <p>Understanding weather warnings and alerts</p> <p>Utilizing communication tools for updates and information dissemination</p> <p>Importance of staying informed during severe weather events</p> <p>Community Engagement and Resources</p> <p>Local government and community support services available</p> <p>Encouraging participation in volunteer programs for snow clearance and support</p> <p>Establishing a community support network during emergencies</p> <p>Interactive Sessions and Q&amp;A</p> <p>Role-playing scenarios for emergency responses</p> <p>Open discussion and Q&amp;A session</p> <p>Feedback and assessment of preparedness level</p>

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