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# SEVERE WEATHER PLANNING AND COMMUNICATION

## What to do and why it matters to EMTs

Emergency medical technicians (EMTs) face many challenges in the line of duty. Extreme weather creates added risks, hampering response and safety efforts.

In Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, police, fire, and trained volunteers are taking weather preparedness and emergency response to the next level, communicating and working together to help their neighbors during heavy storms, hurricanes, and flooding.

As a follow up, our severe weather checklist offers tips and action items to help first responders and their families stay safe if disaster strikes. Together, these articles provide practical examples and steps to enhance preparedness for public safety agencies and the communities they serve.

*Articles by FirstNet staff*
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# CONNECTING WHEN IT MATTERS MOST

## Lessons in severe weather preparedness from Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey

*By FirstNet Staff*

Severe weather is increasing and affecting communities in new ways. As these events become more frequent and disruptive, first responders must adapt through planning, training, and research.

One thing has not changed: the need to stay connected. From large cities to small towns, communication is critical for emergency coordination and response. New tools, devices, and technology also help personnel stay in touch, even in areas where two-way radios cannot reach.

### Preparedness that starts in the community

For the borough of Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, emergency preparedness is a group effort that extends beyond the local police and fire departments to include volunteer service. Many residents have heeded the call, demonstrating a sense of civic duty and unique community spirit that makes their town special.

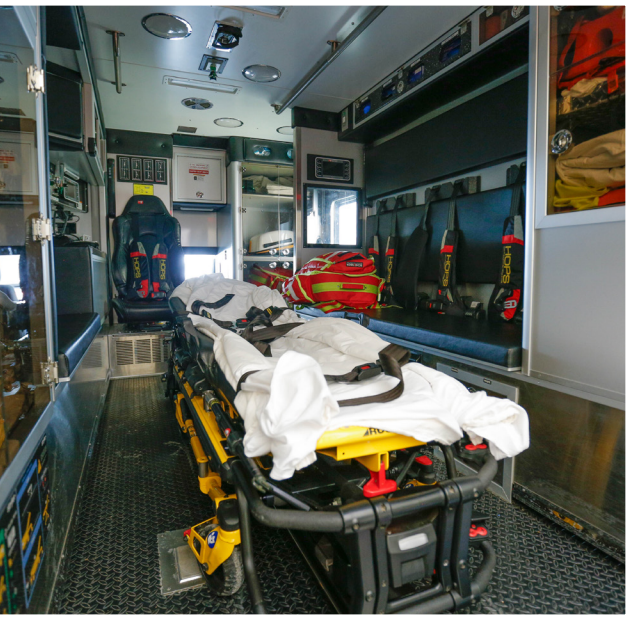


Julie Taylor, Captain, Ho-Ho-Kus Volunteer Ambulance Corps

That volunteerism spans two organizations, the Ho-Ho-Kus Volunteer Fire Department and the **Ho-Ho-Kus Volunteer Ambulance Corps**. Together, they work with local agencies to deliver aid whenever and wherever they're needed, including during weather emergencies. Like many towns and cities across the country, those




The FirstNet Response Operations Group™ supports FirstNet customers in weather emergencies using deployable network assets like Cells on Wheels (COWs).






(Above) FirstNet interoperability helps public safety coordinate resources across agencies. (Right) Ho-Ho-Kus Ambulance Corps EMTs play a critical role in local emergencies.

emergencies can come from almost anywhere.

Just 30 minutes north of New York City, Ho-Ho-Kus is vulnerable to land-based weather patterns, as well as large-scale coastal events like hurricanes and tropical storms. Winters can be fierce, with freezing temperatures accompanying snow and ice. Summers brings heat, humidity, thunderstorms, and lightning. Heat stroke is always a risk.

Flooding, severe winds, power outages, and transportation incidents are just a few of the issues that have impacted the borough in recent years. Ho-Ho-Kus is also home to commercial businesses, industrial facilities, a commuter rail line, and a major state highway, all of which create unique public safety challenges when severe weather hits.

## Looking out for one another

Home to roughly 4,000 people, Ho-Ho-Kus may be small, but the work required to protect residents and local businesses is significant. That commitment is echoed through those who serve. Police, firefighters, emergency personnel, volunteers, and borough administrators coordinate resources through collaboration and teamwork.

As a captain in the ambulance corps and an emergency medical technician (EMT), volunteer Julie Taylor thrives on helping her community. To hear her tell it, Ho-Ho-Kus is the type of place where everyone's willing to lift a hand.

"You can always rely on people being good here and helping each other out," she said. "Even in snowstorms, people will dig out their neighbors' driveway if they're an older couple, or if they're away."

Taylor has long recognized how this mindset has made her community stronger and more resilient. When everyone looks out for one another, checking on someone after a blizzard or delivering sandbags before a storm just feels right.

Ambulance corps and fire department volunteers differ from borough employees because they serve without pay. They earn certifications, complete training, and take shifts in their spare time while also managing full-time jobs and family responsibilities.

"We have about 40 people in the ambulance corps, all different age ranges and different designations in life," Taylor said. "We back our fire department and our police department and we work really well with them, just assisting the community any way we can."

That assistance was crucial during Hurricane Irene, when the Ho-Ho-Kus Brook flooded streets, homes, and yards and uprooted trees and bushes. The following year, Hurricane Sandy battered homes and downed power lines, cutting power to 99 percent of the borough.

In response, the ambulance corps helped with evacuations, provided medical care, and delivered oxygen to older residents. Some members opened their homes to people who needed a place to stay. Others cooked and delivered food to nearby shelters until power was restored.

Volunteer corps member Carol Taylor swells with pride when she thinks about what they did during that time. "You see people at their very worst and then you see them smile. It's life changing for them and it's life changing for us."

Those words capture an important reality about emergency preparedness. When you have the people, resources, and will to be successful, it improves your ability to respond.

## Technology makes the difference

Pride and a sense of duty go a long way, but agencies also need access to accurate

information to protect their communities. Technology has made this work faster and easier by streamlining communication, shortening response times, improving visibility, and reducing risk.

Advanced tools such as early detection and forecasting systems, 3-D maps, community alerts, drones, and incident management platforms give agencies and residents a critical advantage when seconds count.

Knowing which areas are more likely to flood can help communities plot evacuation routes ahead of a hurricane. Cellular notifications can provide crucial information to residents before it's too late. Airborne drones can identify stranded residents, downed power lines, and wildfires so agencies can direct resources with greater precision.

Close-knit and caring, Ho-Ho-Kus shows what preparedness looks like when agencies and neighbors share these responsibilities. Checklists, procedures, weather alerts, emergency kits, and clean water all matter. But people must put these resources to work, and communication must bring them together.

**"You can always rely on people being good here and helping each other out. Even in snowstorms, people will dig out their neighbors' driveway if they're an older couple, or if they're away."**

Julie Taylor, Captain,
Ho-Ho-Kus Volunteer Ambulance Corps

## Communicate early and often

The same principles that help Ho-Ho-Kus first responders succeed in crises also help residents and town officials. When severe weather strikes, residents need to know when to stay off the roads and when to shelter in place. City managers need to understand the threat to infrastructure and know when and how to implement disaster continuity plans.



Satellite Cells on Light Trucks (SatCOLTs) can provide cellular connectivity in areas where traditional networks may be unavailable.

Whether the threat comes in the form of storms, floods, high winds, or fires, it's important to ask a few basic questions as you prepare:

- Is there a plan?
- Do we have the information we need?
- How will we communicate in an emergency?

The answers to those questions often determine how effectively individuals, families, and communities respond when severe weather arrives. At the same time, the communities that navigate emergencies most successfully prioritize communication long before disaster strikes.

Without reliable communication, neighborhoods, towns, and cities may suffer harm beyond the event itself. If residents miss evacuation orders or receive a critical weather update too late, they may not know to leave. This can put their lives and the lives of first responders at risk.

The goal of any preparedness plan is to reduce harm and the risk of injury before, during, and after an event. Whether the threat is severe weather, a natural disaster, a wildfire, or something else, a strong safety and communication foundation helps communities respond when the unthinkable occurs.

# SEVERE WEATHER PREPAREDNESS CHECKLIST

## Reduce risks in the field and at home

*By FirstNet Staff*

Severe weather events can be chaotic, unpredictable, and dangerous. A clear, documented emergency plan helps protect lives, property, and personnel. Taking steps to reduce risk through training, education, and safety procedures can mean the difference between an effective response and one that puts lives or belongings at risk.

Your public safety agency likely has detailed procedures for severe weather. Local or state governments may also offer planning and evacuation resources. However, first responders may overlook how a weather emergency could impact their own homes and families.

Use this checklist to assess your personal and professional preparedness. It can help you build awareness and navigate difficult situations safely.

### 1. Learn how to respond to hazard-specific events

Different weather events create different medical challenges, including hypothermia, heat stroke, and asthma. EMTs should understand the risks associated with hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, wildfires, winter storms, extreme heat, and other events so they can respond effectively.

**Why it matters:**

- Hurricanes and tornadoes may cause trauma injuries, drownings, and prolonged power outages
- Wildfires can lead to respiratory emergencies and burn injuries
- Heat waves increase cases of heat exhaustion and dehydration
- Floods create contamination risks and the potential for water rescues
- Winter storms may lead to frostbite, injuries related to snow or ice removal, and traffic accidents

**Preparation tip:** Review local emergency management plans and participate in weather-specific training exercises throughout the year.

### 2. Prioritize personal preparedness

First responders are often called to perform in stressful situations. Setting expectations with loved ones and creating a safety plan helps protect your family so you can focus on the community.

**Why it matters:**

- Severe weather incidents often require extended shifts lasting 12 to 24 hours or more
- First responders may be unable to return home for several days in the most extreme emergencies, or if infrastructure has been destroyed or is impassible
- Family emergencies can distract responders from their duties, compromising the safety of others

**Preparation tip:** Maintain a family emergency plan, emergency contacts list, backup childcare arrangements, and several days of essential supplies at home.

### 3. Assemble and maintain a disaster response kit

During extreme events, supplies and medical equipment may be hard to find. Keep enough reserve supplies or identify other ways to restock them. This helps your agency serve the community for long periods.

**Why it matters:**

- Supply chains may be disrupted
- Technical systems may fail
- Food and medicine may need to support large patient populations in unconventional scenarios

**Preparation tip:** Response kits should contain items like:

- Extra personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks and latex gloves
- Flashlights and batteries
- Portable phone chargers
- Weather-resistant clothing
- N95 respirators
- Water and food supplies
- Additional trauma and wound-care supplies

### 4. Strengthen communication capabilities

Extreme weather can disrupt radio, landline, and cellular service. A critical communication network gives emergency messages priority. It helps public safety agencies stay in contact and coordinate resources until regular service returns.

**Why it matters:**

- Cell towers may fail or become overwhelmed
- Power outages and downed telephone lines limit communication
- Multiple agencies must coordinate rapidly for the benefit of people, property, and the community

**Preparation tip:** Always-on, priority networks like FirstNet®, Built with AT&T provide first responders and their families with priority access on a communication network separate from public traffic. Additional resources like portable cell sites enable agencies to communicate when local networks are down.

## 5. Prepare for mass injuries, casualties, and surge events

Severe weather and natural disasters can cause many injuries in a short time, often in one area. Responders must know how to assess, prioritize, and care for those affected.

**Why it matters:**

- Events like hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods can impact entire neighborhoods simultaneously
- Damaged infrastructure may prevent emergency vehicles from transporting patients to care facilities
- Hospital emergency departments may be quickly overwhelmed
- Injury severity needs to be prioritized so the most critically injured are treated first

**Preparation tip:** Plan and practice triage procedures, resource allocation, patient tracking systems, and what to do in the event of a resource shortage.

## 6. Become skilled in evacuation support

Many disasters require responders to move vulnerable people to safety. They may need to work in dangerous conditions and use aircraft, off-road vehicles, or other special equipment.

**Why it matters:**

- Nursing home and hospital patients may require careful evacuation and relocation using beds, wheelchairs, and hospital equipment, including oxygen
- Individuals with disabilities often need specialized assistance
- Aircraft or high-clearance vehicles may require specialized loading and unloading

**Preparation tip:** Become familiar with ambulatory and non-ambulatory patient movement, emergency vehicle loading, medical transport, and shelter-in-place procedures.

## 7. Protect yourself from environmental hazards

Responders may overlook extreme temperatures, chemicals in the air or water, and sun exposure during an emergency. Loose or falling debris can also create unsafe conditions.

**Why it matters:**

- Floodwaters may contain hazardous chemicals and materials
- Wildfire smoke can impair respiratory function; this can lead to long-term injury, if left unchecked
- Extreme heat increases fatigue and heat stress
- Debris fields create risks of cuts, falls, and crush injuries

**Preparation tip:** Always perform risk assessments before entering an emergency area and use appropriate PPE. Monitor hydration, rest periods, and environmental exposure during operations.

## 8. Build community relationships before disasters occur

Strong community relationships can improve disaster response. Hold meetings and training sessions before severe weather occurs. Explain what people can expect and provide tips on what to do.

**Why it matters:**

- Local organizations often become critical support networks during disasters and, in some cases, can provide additional assistance
- Vulnerable populations can be identified to ensure they are evacuated safely
- Open communication promotes trust, compliance, and plan adoption within the community

**Preparation tip:** Schedule preparedness events and emergency planning workshops in or near community hubs like schools, churches, local libraries, and senior centers. Publish event information on social media and in community newsletters to promote attendance.

## 9. Prepare for mental and emotional challenges

Disasters and critical incidents can place heavy mental demands on responders and their families. Mental, emotional, and physical health are vital to operational readiness.

**Why it matters:**

- Police officers, firefighters, and EMTs witness traumatic injuries frequently and over extended periods of time
- Stress and fatigue can impact decision making and response
- Long-duration incidents can contribute to burnout and psychological distress

**Preparation tip:** Learn stress management techniques and psychological first aid principles to help yourself and your peers. Remove yourself from the scene, if possible. Consider participating in peer support programs that help first responders cope with stressful events and critical incidents.

## 10. Train consistently using exercises and realistic scenarios

Preparation is most effective when skills are practiced regularly and agencies plan and communicate together. This creates trust and reliability in the field.

**Why it matters:**

- Disasters can be complex and unpredictable
- Training creates opportunities to learn and make mistakes in a safe environment
- Multi-agency coordination establishes agency responsibilities and full group response

**Preparation tip:** Train using classroom exercises, disaster drills, evacuation simulations, and weather-specific response scenarios. Focus should include medical care, logistics, communications, risk mitigation, and incident management.

## Helping when it counts

During extreme weather, first responders fill many roles. The best teams prepare long before disaster strikes. They build knowledge, maintain equipment, improve communication, stay physically ready, and form strong community ties. This preparation can help save lives and communities recover faster.




## FirstNet keeps you connected so you enter the scene informed and ready to act.

### Reliable in-field solutions

Portable mobile routers and hotspot devices, like FirstNet MegaRange™, help public safety stay connected on the go.

### Powerful apps for critical situations

FirstNet apps provide GPS mapping, live data sharing, fleet tracking and secure communication—enhancing situational awareness and response times.

### Dedicated security center

Security is the cornerstone of the FirstNet network. The Security Operations Center is staffed by FirstNet security experts and manages traffic 24/7.

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