

H.575 re Town Service Officers SJH testimony

My experience with our Town Services Officer was in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene. The storm came on Sunday. By Monday morning, we realized that Rochester was one of the towns that were completely cut off from the rest of Vermont.

There were no roads open in any direction, not even to Hancock, four miles away.

Our electricity was out. Our local transformer had been destroyed by the flood so we knew it would be days or weeks before we had power again.

We had no land line telephone service outside our local exchange that services Rochester, Hancock and Granville. (Hancock and Granville were also cut off from the world and each other)

Our very limited cell service in the Rochester village (AT&T, not Verizon) was also down because of the lack of electric power.

I was personally traumatized. One of our friends had just escaped as their house slid into the river. On Sunday afternoon, I had watch as my neighbors two doors down were evacuated by bucket loader. (Yes, they sat in the maw of the bucket loader.) Those same neighbors had watched caskets and bones wash by their house as part of our town cemetery washed away. My tenant across the street had his car destroyed by the flood. My next door neighbor whose house is lower ground than mine had water come up to the rim of his basketball hoop. Our house had about an inch of water in the cellar, but we had no real damage (it missed our furnace pilot light by half an inch).

On Monday morning I realized that I had to get radio reception and bought nearly the last of the 9 volt batteries from the Hardware store just up the street. As I listened to the Mark Johnson show, the Governor was being interviewed. Someone called in about the flood, and the Governor said "Oh, anyone who is having a problem can call 211." One of my friends who lives up in the Hollow (about 800 feet above the village) was sitting in her car so she could get radio reception. Sue called in to let the Governor know that in Rochester, calling 211 was really not an option for anyone living down in the river valley.

The good news was that Rochester did have a Town Services Officer. And we were all stuck in town together. As many of us took turns manning the phone in the Town Clerk's office (we did still have land line phone service within the town of Rochester), we were very happy to be able to refer people to Paula. She had a grasp of the range of services available that exceeded that of our town clerk or any of the volunteers.

So I am here to urge this committee to retain the Town Service Officer in current law. H.575 should simply clarify which benefits require referral to State agencies.