

State's mutual aid program is unique

Public works departments agree to share resources

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DERRY — Bright and early tomorrow morning, Joseph Troy of Derry and Richard "Bucky" Buxton of Chester will climb aboard a pair of 10-wheeler dump trucks to help repair one of the most devastated roads in the state.

Instead of hiring contractors, the town of Wilton will be able to tap the expertise of Troy and Buxton — both Derry Public Works employees — as part of New Hampshire's Public Works Mutual Aid Program.

Much like the agreements fire and police departments share with neighboring cities and towns, public works officials from across the state have banded together to share resources during states of emergency.

The program was used for the first time Columbus Day weekend when one of the most powerful storms to hit New Hampshire in decades struck western New Hampshire. Flooded riverbanks pulled homes from the earth, and roads and bridges were washed away.

In the end, the storm killed five people and forced more than 1,000 people to evacuate their homes. Six

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roads washed away in Wilton, a rural town with 3,700 residents that neighbors Milford and Peterborough. Troy and Buxton will be refilling a large gap of roadway wiped out next to Cold River Road, which connects the town to Route 128.

"Having these guys has really been helpful," said Jim Terrell, Wilton's road agent, who has a staff of seven. "Usually I'd have to hire trucks in a situation like this, but a lot of contractors would be in demand. And the workers usually go to the highest bidder."

More importantly, advocates say, municipal workers have specific knowledge and expertise that are sometimes lacking with private companies.

"It makes sense that we help each other out," said Alan Cote, Derry's public works director. "We're a small state with limited resources and we may be on the receiving end of something like this some day."

"The other thing is that it helps our employees to get another view on how things are done in other parts of the state," said Cote, who is also vice chairman of the mutual aid program.

So far, 90 communities have joined the program, and town building inspectors are now form-

ing a similar pact with the center.

Because the storm was declared a federal disaster, Derry will be able to make a claim with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to recover whatever expenses it will bear for helping Wilton, Cote said. But the workers, who will get room and board from Wilton during their three-day stay, are giving up personal time as well.

The genesis of the mutual aid program for public works departments came about in the late 1990s when a public works director in Bow decided towns needed a better way to cope with the aftermath of what was considered a "100-year storm," which brought more than a foot of rain that flooded the southern part of the state.

The University of New Hampshire's Technology Transfer Center began working with Bow and other communities to create an online network used by public works directors and road agents. The center now offers an array of training courses for those town employees that range from road reconstruction to public relations.

"We realized that municipalities can't deal with emergencies all by themselves and contractors don't have the same experience," said Kathy DesRoche, assistant director at the transfer center. "This is built on the same model

that police and fire departments have been using for years."

An online database lists equipment and personnel available. Volunteers, including Cote, carry pagers in case a town in need can't access a computer to do the work themselves.

An important part of the program, DesRoche said, is that municipal workers will be able to seek help from fellow workers outside the area where a storm or disaster might strike.

"Our storms are bigger, but more regionalized, so you can't rely on the town next to you for help," she said. "But a town that's two or three towns away may be perfectly fine."

New Hampshire is the first state in the country to develop a mutual aid program for public works, but other states including Maine, Vermont and Wisconsin have expressed interest in developing their own networks, DesRoche said.

Aside from dump trucks or forklifts, towns can also ask for secretaries to help with accounting or building inspectors to survey disaster sites. Towns pay \$25 a year to be part of the network. And Cote said towns are self-insured when they respond to other communities.

"I consider it exceptionally cheap insurance," he said.