



## NEWS

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## Sussex EOC at the center of the storm

*Storms provide a test of emergency facility*

By Ron MacArthur

Joe Thomas is having trouble keeping track of the days. For nearly a week, he's put in long hours that blend into each other.

As director of county emergency operations, Thomas and many others have been on duty with just a few breaks since Friday, Feb. 5 – two days before the Super Bowl.

Staff at Sussex County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in Georgetown has been living at the center for most of the past six days, sleeping when they can on cots placed in their offices.

As the hub of emergency services, the center receives calls of all descriptions, from medical emergencies and requests for information to stranded people seeking help to get out of their homes. County employees man phone banks and direct calls to the proper agencies.

Thomas said all calls are logged, but he has no idea how many storm calls the center has received. He pointed to 3-inch stack of colored slips of paper containing names and information of people who have received assistance from the National Guard.

Five National Guard and Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) units have been stationed at the center at the county airport complex. Thomas said even the high-profile guard vehicles were having trouble getting down some county roads to reach people needing assistance. The plows have been invaluable, he said.

Thomas said the past six days have been the first real test of the county's new emergency operations center, opened in April 2008. "So far, so good," Thomas said Wednesday, Feb. 10, as the center was gearing up for this week's second major winter storm.

The center lost electricity and was working on generators twice during the weekend storm.

Even Thomas was a victim of the storm. When he did take some time off, he couldn't go home; his family was staying with relatives because his home had no power.

Thomas said 40 people are stationed at the center, twice the normal number. Representatives from the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, Delaware Department of Transportation, Delaware Electric Cooperative, Sussex County Emergency Medical Services, Delaware Emergency Management Agency, Delaware State Police and Delaware National Guard man a large phone bank with individual computers in front of huge television screens monitoring the latest weather information and storm-related news. EOC staff oversees the operation and amateur radio operators keep an eye on radar.

Thomas said having everyone in one room is essential to proper coordination during an emergency. Conference phone calls occur at least three times a day with agencies outside of the county. "With everyone here we can just walk over to someone and make it happen," Thomas said.

Thomas said feeding everyone at the center has been critical. He said Walmart and Fresh Pride stores have helped to keep the center stocked with food, even opening when the stores were closed.

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