

Remembering the 2016 flood five years on

6/23/2021



June 23, 2016 dawned like any other humid summer day. Weather forecasters knew it was going to rain, but later that afternoon the skies opened up like no one had ever seen as a virtually stationary storm front settled over West Virginia, dropping as much as 10 inches of rain in a 24-hour period.

In Clendenin, the Elk River surged from its banks and rose five feet deep downtown. Homes were flooded in Elkview.

Dozens were trapped in the Elkview shopping center after the only bridge in washed away. DOH crews quickly got together with county officials and built a huge ramp near 84 Lumber so the trapped people could get out.

<https://transportation.wv.gov/communications/PressRelease/Pages/Remembering-the-2016-flood-five-years-on.aspx>



In White Sulphur Springs, the Greenbrier River burst from its banks, washing homes, cars and people away in its swath. In Richwood, the Cherry River exploded into the streets, flooding homes and businesses as homes on the hillsides were swept off their foundations by water rushing in from above.

When the waters receded, 23 people – friends, neighbors and family members – were dead. Thousands of homes were damaged or destroyed. Twelve counties were declared disaster areas. One hundred twenty-three bridges were damaged, and five were destroyed. Floodwaters closed 250 roads were closed, and pavement washed out on 1,300 separate sites.

Calls started coming in to local West Virginia Division of Highways offices immediately.

In Nicholas County, DOH County Administrator Charlie Reel was working multiple phone lines at once and juggling cell phone and radio calls, trying to get a handle on the extent of the damage and assess what needed to be done. He headed toward Richwood – apparent site of the worst flooding – to assess the situation and possibly check on his own home.

There wasn't time. Along the way he was diverted by a DOH worker trapped by fallen trees in a loader near Curtain. Reel and others finally freed the man by literally ripping the door off the vehicle, but by that time water all around had risen. Reel had no choice but to return to headquarters and try to contact his wife, Teresa, by phone.

"I'm 60 years old and have lived in Nicholas County all my life," he said. "I had never seen it rain that hard."

Teresa called to inform him there was water rising in their house. He convinced her to take the animals and get out, none too soon.

Reel continued directing flood response, finally getting home around 2:30 a.m. The house had literally been twisted on its foundation.

He was torn between staying with Teresa and his responsibility to the people of Nicholas County. His wife of only two years helped him make the decision.

"She said, 'You've got a whole county to worry about,'" Reel said. "'I'll take care of the house.'"

"I couldn't have done it if my wife hadn't been the person that she is."

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In the Clendenin area, District 1 Maintenance Assistant Brodis Brown – then Kanawha County Administrator – was on his way up Interstate 79 with his wife, Daphne, to take their son to a doctor’s appointment when they were stopped by a mudslide near Amma. They turned around and headed to Elkview, only to find the area inundated with water. They spent the night at the home of Daphne’s boss in Charleston.

As elsewhere, Brown’s biggest priority was organizing flood response.

“I really wanted to help these people out,” he said. “These people lost everything.

“It took a toll on me,” Brown said. “I was also concerned about our employees.”

Some DOH workers had been trapped in Clendenin. One was forced to abandon his vehicle and spent the night on a hillside.

“Some of our workers could get back and some of them couldn’t,” Brown said. “They spent the night in crew cabs.”

Some of the worst loss of life occurred in Greenbrier County.

“The emotional side of it was rough,” said District 9 Engineer Steve Cole. “They were recovering debris with bodies under it on the golf course at The Greenbrier.”

Cole said one of his 14-year-old daughter’s best friends was trapped by floodwaters. She and her parents tied themselves together with extension cords.

“She broke loose and didn’t make it,” Cole said. “She drowned.”

In the coming days, one of Cole’s biggest fears was that DOH crews would discover her body while clearing debris and repairing roads.

“That one still breaks my heart,” he said. “My daughter was the same age.”

Through emergency contracts and special rules that allowed DOH to let and award contracts in days rather than weeks, contractors were quickly brought in to repair bridges and roads. Districts without storm damage sent crews to help the areas hardest hit. Almost to a person, DOH employees were working long hours for days on end to get their communities up and running again.

“My guys were out there in that slop, day after day, cutting trees and working,” said Reel. “They were working 16, 18 hours a day. I had to make them go home.”



But what many DOH workers remember most about the floods was the way communities, government agencies, businesses and others came together to overcome one of the worst disasters in West Virginia history.

“There was a really big sense of community at the time,” recalled Brown. “Neighbors helping each other, food and clothing drives, churches coming in to help. Businesses were bringing us food and water.”

“I met more on-ground heroes than I had ever seen before, said District 1 Manager Arlie Matney, a veteran of the U.S. Army’s 82nd Airborne Division.

At the time of the floods, Matney was one of dozens of workers sent from District 10 to help with flood cleanup and repair.

He was behind the wheel of a road grader in Clay County when he came upon the home of an elderly woman who had been trapped for days before help arrived. As he stopped by the side of the road, the woman walked up and offered him a bottle of water.

“I said, ‘Ma’am, I have water,’” Matney told her.

“She said, “That is the only thing I have I can thank you with.’ She stayed by that road grader until I drank that bottle of water.

“It was an honor to try to get in and help people.”



With work continuing in all 55 counties across the state, the West Virginia Division of Highways and the West Virginia Department of Transportation remind the public of the importance of keeping everyone safe in work zones by keeping “Heads up; phones down!”