



WORKFORCE

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When the floods hit, CSEA members respond

See pages 9-12

**Anti-union groups
defraud member**

Page 3

**CSEA's Kukys discusses
health care staffing**

Page 5

**Tax workers made whole
after payroll error**

Page 8

When the floods hit, CSEA members respond

Editor's Note: On July 9, heavy rains hit much of New York state, leading to catastrophic flooding, particularly in the Town of Highlands in Orange County, which includes the village of Highland Falls, hamlet of Fort Montgomery and West Point. In that community, more than 8 inches of rain fell within several hours, causing damage to homes and infrastructure. The storm also claimed the life of a Fort Montgomery woman. CSEA members have been key to helping the community and surrounding areas recover from the storm. On this page, we highlight the efforts of CSEA members to recover from flooding at nearby Bear Mountain State Park, which was heavily damaged in the storm.

BEAR MOUNTAIN — Officials called it a “once-in-a-thousand-year” storm, but Bear Mountain State Park Regional Maintenance Supervisor

Leroy Conklin can only attest to the last 48 years he’s worked for state parks.

“It’s just another day in the park,” said Conklin wryly, while surveying the destruction at Bear Mountain State Park caused by more than 8 inches of rain that fell over several hours on July 9. “The power of water; there are people who don’t realize what water can do.”

Torrential rain knocked down trees, washed out roads, created rivers through structures and swallowed whole vehicles, particularly in Orange and Rockland counties where the park is located.

When the storm struck, there were no workers or visitors at the park.

CSEA Palisades Interstate Park Commission Local 1st Vice President Cristian Gonzalez, who lives near the park, had planned to have dinner with his family that evening but had



From left to right, Regional Maintenance Supervisor Leroy Conklin and Carpenter Cristian Gonzalez clean flood damage and salvage what equipment they can in their respective shops.



Cristian Gonzalez, front left, observes flooding damage to the road, vehicles and equipment at Bear Mountain State Park.

to scrap those plans when roads started flooding.

“We’ve never seen anything like this,” said Gonzalez, a carpenter.

As this edition went to press, the park remains closed to visitors. Some roads remain closed and buildings and structures like the ones that housed his carpentry shop and Conklin’s machine shop have either been condemned or require extensive cleanup and renovation.

“Thank God it happened on a Sunday because we would have been here,” said Gonzalez, pointing to the stream that now flows through his carpentry shop. The walls are warped and inside, mud, dirt and debris are scattered throughout. The building has been condemned.

As soon as the workers returned, they rolled up their sleeves and got to work cleaning and salvaging whatever they could.

“We all pulled together,” said Conklin. “No one was idle.”

A skilled craftsman who takes great pride in making from scratch anything that’s needed, Conklin bemoaned the loss of valuable tools and equipment that many workers also individually owned.

“A lot of the workers are upset about it,” said Conklin. Yet, he

praised management for being attentive and responsive to their needs.

More importantly, he stressed the importance of unity and simple acts of kindness that rise to the surface during and after events like this one.

“He’s my brother,” said Conklin, gruffly while pointing to Gonzalez and stealing a reassuring smile in the midst of all the chaos.

— David Galarza



A stream now flows through the condemned building that once housed Cristian Gonzalez’s Carpentry shop.

When the floods hit, CSEA members respond

TOWN OF HIGHLANDS — While heavy rain was expected in the Hudson Valley on the afternoon of July 9, no one foresaw a storm that would drop more than 8 inches of rain over several hours and change residents' lives forever.

But that's what happened in the Orange County Town of Highlands, home to the Village of Highland Falls, hamlet of Fort Montgomery and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Primarily built on a hill, the town faced dangerous flash flooding that had homes rapidly taking on water, saw roads and bridges crumbling and took the life of a Fort Montgomery woman.



Waters began rising to flood levels on Route 9W in Highland Falls in the late afternoon of July 9. This photo was taken around 3:45 p.m. Motorists were able to remove part of the barrier in order to make a U-turn and get out of harm's way. (Photo by Jessica Ladlee)

A personal experience

Editor's Note: CSEA Communications Specialist Jessica Ladlee, a Highland Falls native, shares her personal and heartbreaking story about the July 9 flooding. Here is her account, in her own words:

We've all seen scenes of catastrophic flooding on the nightly news but don't often see it here, so a forecast for rain didn't seem out of the ordinary on a summer day.

As my family was driving south to Rockland County via Route 9W the afternoon of July 9, we encountered the roadway quickly rising with water while passing through my hometown of Highland Falls.

I'm grateful that my husband's first responder experience kicked in and he and other drivers strategized, moving vehicles to allow for drivers

The aftermath has been devastating. Many CSEA members helped lead the quick response to the storm, which has helped this close-knit community move toward recovery.

Putting training into action

When the storms hit, our union members kicked into action.

At the Orange County 911 Center in Goshen, CSEA members fielded emergency calls and dispatched first responders, including swift water rescue teams, to areas in need.

Complicating the response was limited road access caused by several main roadways washing out, including the Popolopen Bridge, a main access point to Fort Montgomery.

While heavy rains hit many Hudson Valley communities, it quickly became clear that the impact here was extreme.

Local media interviewed CSEA Town of Ramapo Unit member Evan Humphrey, who responded in his role as training officer for the Stony Point Ambulance Corps.

Humphrey was part of an emergency medical services crew that risked their lives to rescue more than a dozen stranded hikers, including a perilous rescue of a father-son duo who fell nearly 100 feet in nearby Bear Mountain State Park.

CSEA members working in emergency management coordinated services and helped first responders access the town, despite multiple

to begin making U-turns away from the flooded roadway.

In the time my kids and I were waiting, the water was quickly rising. We turned around and were able to make it home before Route 9W was shut down.

I hoped that was the worst of the storm. It wasn't even close.

My phone rang later that evening. I received the heartbreaking news that a childhood friend, Pamela Nugent, died after being swept up in the floods in Fort Montgomery. She was only 43, was engaged to be married and had so much to look forward to.

Pam was one of the smartest people I've known and was incredibly knowledgeable on environmental issues. The fact that our changing

road closures and limited access.

CSEA members employed by local highway departments, including Stony Point, Cornwall and Cornwall-on-Hudson, worked to ensure storm drains were clear and dealt with initial recovery as the rain finally subsided. Those communities weren't hit as hard as the Town of Highlands, but still sustained serious damage.

New York State Department of Transportation workers also responded to flooding, and several state roads sustained catastrophic damage.

Recovery efforts

In the Town of Highlands, numerous residents were forced from their homes and into shelters.

People donated bottled water to residents to help offset a boil water notice that lasted several weeks for some areas.

State Division of Homeland Security & Emergency Services and New York Department of State representatives conducted hundreds of damage assessments at homes and buildings throughout the community.

CSEA members employed at Orange County Emergency Management coordinated the tremendous nonprofit flood response outreach from across the country.

Volunteers trained in flood response, including some from nonprofit organizations, spent weeks cleaning out residents' homes of belongings ruined by water and ripping out mold-infested

weather patterns, regardless of one's opinion on their cause, contributed to her passing still leaves me at a loss for words and makes my heart hurt for her family and fiancé.

While media coverage of such a tragedy can seem invasive, I'm grateful that numerous outlets ran feature stories showing the compassionate and accomplished person Pam was. Her eagerness to continually learn new things and embark on new adventures resulted in her making friends wherever she went.

I pray for peace and comfort for them and healing for the community where I was fortunate to grow up. Thank you to everyone who, whether in professional or volunteer capacities, has been there to help.

"The way in which people have rallied around the greater Town of Highlands community and neighboring areas has been nothing short of amazing."



Residents of Fort Montgomery and Highland Falls, particularly those whose homes run on wells, faced boil notices for several weeks after the July 9 floods. Representatives from the Orange County Health Department were on-site collecting water samples from residents for testing. (Photo courtesy of Mary Jane Pitt, News of the Highlands)

drywall and other materials.

CSEA-represented sanitation workers from many area municipalities headed to the Town of Highlands to assist with the vast bulk pickup from these demolitions.

While local government workers helped repair affected local roads, state DOT workers began repairing state roadways to help increase access. Other state roads remain closed, including Route 218, which was so badly damaged by rain that the road collapsed, and a huge chunk remains missing.

CSEA members working for the Orange County Department of Social Services and Department of Health are also helping residents. While Social Services workers are helping displaced families find temporary housing, Health workers are helping ensure water safety, including conducting water testing for several weeks after E. coli was found during private well water testing.

Helping the community

"I am grateful to all of the CSEA members who have answered the call to help," said Southern Region President Anthony M. Adamo. "When the rain first hit, so many CSEA members were responding because they volunteer with our local fire departments and EMS. Since then, they've



Workers from the New York State Department of Transportation conduct road repairs on Route 9W after the July 9 floods washed out significant portions of the highway. (Photo provided by New York State DOT.)

Town of Cornwall Unit member Michael Cwikla, left, and Unit Vice President Brenden Doyle work to redirect future water flow down the side of Old West Point Road in Cornwall. The flooding that hit the area on July 9 created the need for numerous road repairs and excavation.



been repairing roadways, ensuring people have safe housing and clean drinking water, and trying to help restore a semblance of normalcy for people who've had their lives upended. The way in which people have rallied around the greater Town of Highlands community and neighboring areas has been nothing short of amazing."

Orange County Unit President Denise Fuchs said the expertise of CSEA members working for the county has been on full display.

"Members have been working around the clock to ensure that the residents of the Town of Highlands and neighboring communities receive every possible resource," said Fuchs. "Many of these workers spend their careers training for disasters, but never imagined they'd encounter one like this right within the county. They've been a huge part of helping take those first steps toward healing."

— Jessica Ladlee



CSEA-represented workers from the City of Middletown Unit were among a group of sanitation workers from across Orange County that headed to Highland Falls and Fort Montgomery to assist with the massive bulk pickup required after flooding caused massive damage to homes. (Photo courtesy of Mary Jane Pitt, News of the Highlands)

Worker safety after flooding

It is important to be aware of the dangers of flooding.

Workers who are involved in assessing and/or cleaning up flood damage to their worksite are at risk of being affected by potential dangers that a flood presents, such as electrical hazards, mold and drowning.

CSEA members should note that operations such as cleaning up hazardous materials or search and rescue should only be performed by workers who have the proper training, experience and equipment.

Remember that employers are responsible for ensuring workers' safety. Specifically, if workers are assigned to cleanup tasks, whether mandatorily or voluntary, employers are required to provide proper sanitation, potable water, equipment, required personal protective equipment (PPE) and training before duties are assigned.

Workplaces should also have written plans and procedures, have alert or notification systems for reporting emergencies, create evacuation routes and assess them for potential hazards and work with local health and public safety authorities.

Here is an overview of some tasks that CSEA members may have to perform following a disaster. To see more resources for emergency response, visit <https://tinyurl.com/OSH-Flood>.

Driving

According to the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), nearly half of flood fatalities are vehicle-related. If the water level is rising around your vehicle, you should abandon it. Do not try to cross flooded roadways if you don't know the water's depth. Employers should also advise workers on alternate routes to destinations in case a roadway is washed out or otherwise unsafe for driving.

Electrical hazards

If water has been anywhere near electrical circuits and equipment, turn off the power at the main breaker or fuse on the service panel. Do not enter flooded areas or touch electrical equipment if the ground is wet.

Tree and debris removal

Workers removing trees and clearing debris are at risk of electrocution from contact with downed power lines, falls from heights and being crushed by falling tree limbs. A worker could also be injured by equipment such as chainsaws or chippers. Employers must provide PPE when this equipment is used.

Mold

Mold exposure can cause congestion, a sore throat, coughing, burning eyes or skin rash. Employers

should provide PPE and train workers on taking precautions such as identifying and correcting moisture problems, making sure that work areas are well ventilated and using hand, eye and respiratory protection.

Chemical and biological hazards

Floodwaters can be contaminated with chemicals from underground storage tanks, raw sewage, dead animals, rotting food and more. To prevent contamination, employers should provide to workers protective clothing such as chemical-resistant outer clothing, boots, protective eye goggles, and plastic or rubber gloves. Employers should also train workers on proper hygiene practices to avoid exposure to waterborne illness.

Drowning

Just 6 inches of swift-moving water can sweep an adult off their feet. To reduce the risk of injuries from falling and/or drowning in floodwaters, employers should assign multiple workers to these tasks and provide a U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (PFD) when working in or near water.

Hypothermia and heat stress

Hypothermia can occur when working in water that is cooler than 75°F. To help prevent hypothermia, employers should ensure workers



Flood debris fills a shop at Bear Mountain State Park. (Photo provided by Daniel Corigliano.)

wear proper clothing, take frequent short breaks in warm, dry shelters and work during the warmest part of the day.

Workers also risk heat stress when working outdoors in high temperatures. Employers should ensure workers wear proper clothing, use sunscreen, frequently hydrate and take frequent short breaks in the shade or indoors, if possible.

— Grace Cross

For more safety and health resources, visit cseany.org/safety.

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On the cover, Town of Cornwall Unit member Michael Cwikla uses the side mirrors on his truck to watch as Unit Vice President Brenden Doyle uses a front end loader to dump fill from the storm into the cab of Cwikla's town truck. (Photo by Jessica Ladlee.)