

CITY OF WILKES-BARRE, PENNSYLVANIA

Anthony "Tony" George
Mayor

Jay Delaney
Fire Chief



Bureau of Fire
20-22 East Ross Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA. 18701-2303
Phone: (570) 208-4261
Fax: (570) 208-4258

**U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging
Witness Testimony
Jay Delaney
Fire Chief and Emergency Management Coordinator
City of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania**

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey, and members of the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging; Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss how cities and towns across the country can help ensure the health, safety, and resilience of older Americans and individuals with disabilities during and after disasters.

I am the Fire Chief for the City of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. I have been honored to serve the city in this role for over 12 years and a total of 36 years in Emergency Services. I am also the Emergency Management Coordinator for the City of Wilkes-Barre and a certified paramedic.

Over 40,000 people reside in Wilkes-Barre, a city located in Luzerne County. Nearly nineteen percent of the county's residents are over age 65, which is three percent higher than the average for the state. And, many of the older residents are concentrated within the city limits.

Like any Fire Chief or Emergency Management Coordinator, I feel a great sense of responsibility for these older Pennsylvanians; many who live by themselves.

My concern for their well-being is heightened whenever there is a threat of a severe storm or weather event.

That is due to a 10,000 square mile watershed that drains into Wilkes-Barre from Susquehanna River, threatening to flood our streets and neighborhoods.

In August of 2011 the threat became very real as the east coast braced for Hurricane Irene and Lee to make landfall. What transpired over that next week explains why early weather tracking, data, surveillance and the flow of information across all levels of government is a priority and critical to the health and safety of residents.

About seven days before the storms were scheduled to hit, we heard from the National Weather Service. They started to send us regular updates about the storm patterns and possible rainfall and potential crests for the Susquehanna River. The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency disseminated critical data to the County Emergency Management Officials and the emergency management coordinator for each municipality.

Wilkes-Barre is protected by a US Army Corp of Engineers levee to a river level of approximately 42 feet. The Susquehanna River crested on September 9, 2011 at a record and historic level of 42.66 feet.

For years, the gauges that measured the water height of Susquehanna River in Wilkes-Barre were broken and were the responsibility of the U.S Geological Survey. Senator Casey led the charge here in Washington to secure the resources to replace our broken gauges. It is because of Senator Casey that we can track – in real time – the possibility of a flood and critical river level data. This type of surveillance information provided the needed data to make risk based decisions for possible evacuation.

Using maps of flooding that took place in 1972 after Hurricane Agnes, we created an evacuation zone. And, on September 9, 2011, we successfully evacuated 15,000 residents of Wilkes-Barre in about 10 hours. This evacuation included Wilkes-Barre City Hall, Wilkes-Barre Police Headquarters and Wilkes-Barre Fire Headquarters as well as the entire downtown, King's College and Wilkes University.

We alerted the local hospital and the two nursing homes in the evacuation zone. They executed their Emergency Preparedness Plans and safely evacuated over 250 seniors. And, if at any time, they thought that they were going to have trouble evacuating in the time required, they knew to request additional help from the Wilkes-Barre City Emergency Operation Center. We would send ambulances and personnel to help.

But, it was the older Pennsylvanians, the seniors, and those with disabilities who still lived in their homes and in the community that I worried about most – the Mr. and Mrs. Smiths who have lived in their home for 50 years.

In preparation for a possible evacuation, we had developed a grid designating areas of responsibility for Fire Department, the Police Department and members of the National Guard.

We drove through South Wilkes-Barre and the downtown making announcements from our vehicles, knocking on doors, and posting evacuation orders. We knocked on every door. We left notes on doors of the homes where no one answered and made an additional check to ensure their evacuation. Most people heeded the request to evacuate on the first try, but if anyone resisted, they took their names and wrote down their addresses and we spent additional time working to get them out of their homes.

We successfully executed our plan because of the seamless collaboration and communication among officials at the national, state, and local levels.

But, even so, after every major event, we look back and discuss how we can improve. For example, should we ever need to evacuate again, we now have a contact in place with a local bus company that agreed to drive routes throughout the city to pick people up and take them to safety.

Following Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, I hope that Congress will conduct its own after action review as it did after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. While Presidential Directive 5 started the advancement of the National Incident Management System it was for the most part put in to action after Hurricane Katrina and is a model for how all levels of government manage all types of emergencies and disasters. As part of that review, I hope that Congress will commit to continue to fully fund the National Weather Service and FEMA, and invest surveillance tools so that we have the most comprehensive information available before, during and after a disaster to guide our decision-making. Without early weather surveillance we have little time to plan and prepare for potential weather events .

I am grateful to the Senate Special Committee on Aging for the opportunity to add my voice to this conversation.

Thank you.