

Township responds to water alert

BY HOWARD PROSNITZ
Staff Writer

When lightning disabled United Water's pumps in Haworth during the evening of Friday, Aug. 3, leaving only the residue in tanks and pipes for use, the facility issued an advisory to customers to boil water for one minute before consuming it.

But many Bergen County residents did not learn about the advisory until Saturday afternoon due to a breakdown in the county's telephone notification system.

Although Teaneck is one of the municipalities that contracts with the county for taped telephone notifications during emergencies, calls did not go out until late Saturday afternoon, and county officials soon decided to discontinue the calls because the information would change.

Teaneck Police Chief Paul Tiernan, a township resident, said that when he did not receive a call at his home, he notified police headquarters.

"We contacted the county and were told that there was a malfunction in the 9-1-1 alert system," said Tiernan.

When police called the county later in the day, they were told that the problem was still being worked on. It was not until 3:30 p.m. that the county fixed the problem, said Tiernan. In the meantime, Teaneck Police had acted on their own to notify residents and businesses.

Initial notification from the county came about 6 a.m. on Saturday with instructions to close all water dependent businesses. Tiernan said that the five officers on patrol at the time began distributing fliers to restaurants and other food establishments.

But an hour later, said Tiernan, the county sent new fliers permitting water-dependent businesses to remain open if they boiled water for cooking and consumption for at least one minute. Police then distributed the new fliers.

In addition, later in the morning police went to all township synagogues to announce the advisory, as Orthodox Jews do not listen to the radio or television or answer the phone on the Sabbath.



ASHLEE WOODRUFF/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

During the water alert, bottled water, as well as extra supplies of water to HUMC, came from a Queen Anne Road based business, US Food Products Corporation.

However, Tiernan chose not to have patrol cars drive through town announcing the alert on their loudspeakers. He recalled that when this was done during an emergency in 1984, many residents did not hear the entire message and called headquarters.

"We have only eight lines and when these lines become flooded, people who have real emergencies cannot get through," Tiernan said. The failed county phone alert did not cost the township any money, said Tiernan, noting that Teaneck pays only a fee per each phone call, with no annual base payment.

The emergency had the potential to have been much worse than it was, said Mayor Elie Y. Katz.

"We must learn from the event and continue to strengthen our response and communication with our residents," he said.

United Water said that the advisory was a precaution and the state later determined that the water in the pipes and tanks had been safe to drink. However, during the advisory, which lasted until Monday, residents, businesses and non-for-profits found various ways of coping.

Although Hackensack University Medical Center lost water pressure and, for awhile, power, Holy Name Hospital was affected less severely, said Catherine Yaxbly, Holy Name's Vice President for planning and government relations.

Holy Name, like HUMC, rescheduled its Saturday kidney dialysis patients to Sunday, but Yaxbly said this was because of reduced water pressure rather than contamination, noting that the hospital maintains a separate water filtration system for dialysis.

However, Holy Name used bottled water for cooking and distributed individual bottles to patients and staff.

"We have plenty of bottled water and we had more brought in," said Yaxbly.

That water, as well as extra supplies of water to HUMC, came from a Queen Anne Road based business, U.S. Food Products Corporation. Owners Edward and Chona Holland noted that the

company had supplied emergency shipments in the past to area hospitals, including to Jersey City Medical Center after a water main broke.

"On Saturday morning, Hackensack Hospital called our emergency number at 4 a.m. and we responded by waking up three drivers and delivering five truck loads of water and ice," said Edward Holland.

Tiernan noted that the advisory was the first time a countywide telephone alert had been attempted. He said that the county generally has 80 emergency lines in place, but on Saturday, raised the number to 200. The county is now considering upgrading the number to 1,300, Tiernan said.

County spokesman Brian Hague said that telephone notification was only one of several methods that the county uses to communicate with the public during emergencies. He noted that in many municipalities police cruised the streets making announcements over loud speakers, and that the county officials spoke on major radio news networks. The alert was also announced on the county Web site, Hague said.

"If you build a house you just don't use a hammer," he said. "Telephone notification is one tool out of many that we use to alert the public as quickly and expeditiously as possible."

In addition, said Hague, the alert was recorded on the Bergen County Health Advisory line at 201-225-7000, which residents can call for information on any potential public health threat.

E-mail prosnitz@northjersey.com
or call 201-646-6925