

A community responds to a crisis Jan. 21/98

By Myron Ulczak

ST-BERNARDIN— It was January 6 when the newly-formed administration of the Nation Township first met in Casselman with their five fire department chiefs to plan emergency plans.

The "Ice Storm of 1998" had hit the area, making driving treacherous not so much because of the slippery conditions, but because the ice build-up was bringing down trees, hydro poles, and electrical wires, often blocking roads.

Within hours, thousands of residences and farms were without electricity.

Gilles Lalonde, chief of the volunteer fire department based in St-Bernardin, recalls that first emergency meeting.

"We planned where we would have shelters and feed the people, but our first priority was to get generators out to the farmers," said Lalonde.

The Caledonia Community Centre would become the shelter which would also be the control centre for its 15 volunteer firemen. Four additional firefighters would be retained to replace those who were needed elsewhere, such as farmers and snowplow operators.

Three firemen worked 12-hour or longer shifts, slept at the shelter and were ready to respond to any emergency situations. Lalonde, deputy chief Guillaume Normand and Danny Bernard, who took charge of the shelter, would spend many hours there in the days to come.

For the first three days of the crisis, Lalonde slept only a few hours each night. All the firemen were taking shifts on patrols, pumping basements and bringing supplies such as drinking water, candles and batteries to needy residents.

Between shifts, the firemen would go to their homes to ascertain if every-

thing was secure and heat up their homes if they could.

"We started a patrol the first morning. We set up barricades and closed some roads where wires were down. We then informed the Ontario Provincial Police where the roads were closed," Lalonde said.

Ontario Hydro would not allow the fire fighters to touch or move the lines. "We wouldn't know if there was still power in the wires. We couldn't take a chance," he warned.

During the patrol, the fire fighters would go door to door (600 households in the former township of Caledonia) to determine who was in the home, if elderly residents were safe and what was needed in the community. This information was marked on a map and updated each day.

At first, when there was no electricity at the shelter, Lionel Paquette, a mobile mechanic from St-Bernardin, offered his generator and his help to the firemen. The generator had to be topped off with gasoline every three hours. Lots of farmers were sharing their generators with their neighbors, Lalonde said.

Later, a large generator which from PPG of Hawkesbury was transported to the Caledonia Community Centre. PPG electricians then wired the building to the generator which provided all the power needed to operate the entire shelter.

Many residents lost their electricity on Tuesday, January 6, and most were without power later on Thursday, when some phone lines were also cut. Now, many residents were isolated, unable to communicate with the outside world, without heat and hot meals; food in their fridges was spoiling and provisions were running low.

Without phone service, the fatigued firemen laboured under a heavier

burden. Ed Julien from TMI Communications in Rockland arrived at the control centre with a cellular phone for the firemen to use. Julien had learned that the firemen had no phones. He said he would return for the phone after the crisis was over.

While the firemen were busy with their chores, their wives and other volunteers from the community were busy looking after other needs. The biggest challenge for the volunteers was to determine how they were going to feed all the people.

At first there was no food at the shelter. Food was purchased with money which Lalonde obtained from the Nation Municipality. Then residents started bringing food which they had prepared or had in their fridges or freezers. Days later, food from residents would be refused for fear that it had spoiled and could cause a health risk.

The army arrived at the shelter on Friday and immediately began to provide the needed support and respite for the exhausted firemen.

They brought a supply of water and other provisions and installed bunks in the shelter. They cut and chopped firewood. They took over the patrols and other chores so that the firemen would be free to do what they were trained to do, fight fires.

A call came in at 11 p.m. on Wednesday, January 14. A fire broke out at a residence in Caledonia Springs, at the far end of their territory. Four soldiers accompanied the firemen to help put out the fire. The Alfred fire department arrived to finish the job so that Lalonde and his men could return to their base.

A family with five children lost their home and all their possessions, except for some clothes packed in some bags. A Christmas

wreath and ribbon still hung on the front of their charred home.

The volunteers who prepared the hot meals at the shelter also got a bit of a break when employees from Consumers Gas came to make hamburgers one time and Alfred College provided hot suppers two consecutive nights.

The soldiers were now stationed at the shelter where they slept and ate. They brought their own food, which was prepared at Vankleek Hill Collegiate Institute, and transported in "hay boxes" which are large insulated food containers.

The army and the Ontario Provincial Police were constantly patrolling the area for suspicious activity or vehicles. Generators were being stolen from people's homes and some houses were vacant and unguarded after the homeowners left to find comfortable quarters. Soldiers had a list of homes and individuals to protect.

On Saturday, January 18, five suspects dressed in army clothes and driving a grey truck were apprehended in Alexandria with stolen generators. "They were in our town last night. The OPP were stopping all trucks in the area last night, even the army vehicles which were also grey," Lalonde reported.

There weren't very many people that stayed overnight at the shelter. One elderly gentleman from St-Bernardin was there from the beginning and for a while, there would be three residents staying overnight.

At the nearby St-Isidore shelter, there were 40 to 50 people who would stay overnight, said Lalonde. "In the village, you can tell your neighbors that you will be away for a while and ask them to keep an eye on your place. In the country, it is different because neighbors

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